

B U N C O

STRAY
DOGS

B E A S T

6

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Illustration by
SANGO HARUKAWA



VISIT...

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BUNGO
STRAY DOGS
BEAST





They continued
to shoot the
breeze for
the next few
minutes or so.

Both boys
shared small
yet profound
experiences
that their
colleagues
would never
be able to
understand
or even
empathize
with.

The two of
them could
just be kids,
something
they seldom
did around
others.



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Bungo Stray Dogs, Volume 6

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Translation by Matt Rutsohn

Cover art by Sango Harukawa

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#0

The young boy raced through the night. He felt as if he would cough up his lungs any minute as the sweat dripped down his cheeks. Hunger and exhaustion blurred his vision. Most would have passed out by now but not this young boy. He kept moving, forcing each foot forward as quickly as he could even if it cost him a limb, for this boy known as Ryuunosuke Akutagawa was out of time. He figured that he would be dead once he finished running down this path.

Akutagawa was a child of the slums, and one of the many who never knew his parents. He lived on the streets with eight other kids who shared his fate. Each one of his peers said the same thing about him: The boy lacked emotions. Even when Akutagawa awoke on the cold pavement every morning, even on the rare occasion he got treated to a meal, even when an adult beat him senseless—he showed little emotion. He would simply stare off into space with his dark, empty eyes. Most adults wrote him off as a heartless brat.

But this unfeeling boy possessed mysterious powers.

He was able to manipulate his clothing. Once, he used it like a rope; another time, like a blade. Before long, he could make it take any shape he desired.

The ability to manipulate the clothing he wore—that was Akutagawa's gift. Nevertheless, this was Yokohama, the city of demons. Buying illegal firearms and grenades was like buying an apple at the store. It was easy. Turning his sleeves into blades and flinging them around was no more shocking than a magic trick. At least, that was what the adults who knew of Akutagawa's ability told him as they mocked him.

Akutagawa's peers were different, though. The eight boys and girls who lived on the streets with him knew how dangerous he was. This filthy, frail boy dressed in rags could approach someone, his eyes void of any emotion, and slit

their throat without warning. Armed, overconfident adults were the quickest to die like this. Many thieves who tried stealing money from the children met their end at Akutagawa's hand.

Akutagawa murdered all those who threatened his turf without showing any emotion or even saying a word, earning him the moniker of the Silent Mad Dog. There was no threatening roar or warning growl. By the time his target realized what was happening, it was already too late; Akutagawa had them by the throat. He was far more vicious than any noisy mad dog. He was shunned, feared—and that was how he became known by his nickname.

Nevertheless, he was still a young boy, one who never got enough to eat and spent his nights in the slums where the cold wind chilled him to the bone. Akutagawa was inherently frail in addition to being short and emaciated. Naturally, the other eight children in his group were hardly any different. That was why they always worked together and looked out for one another.

But there was no need for that any longer. All his friends had been killed. He knew who murdered them, too. The killers were part of a small armed organization that had made its way from the west to the slums of Yokohama. In truth, *armed organization* was just a nice-sounding term for those who attacked and stole from unarmed transport ships that frequented the port and slums. In other words, they were pirates. Though they were newcomers in the area, the group formed an alliance with the criminal organization the Port Mafia and thereby received permission to operate within the region. Not a soul would dare fight back against a subsidiary branch of the Mafia—the very embodiment of Yokohama's dark underbelly.

One of Akutagawa's friends had accidentally overheard the date and time the pirates were going to carry out an illegal trade deal, so, fearing being reported to the police, the outlaws attacked the children on their turf and slaughtered every one of them. Only with the help of his younger sister was Akutagawa narrowly able to escape, although not unscathed. Despite his grave injuries that would normally take a month's rest to heal, Akutagawa now dashed through the black of night with the utmost swiftness.

The children had a rule: If one of them got hurt, the others would avenge them. It was the only way they could protect themselves from those who tried

to walk all over them. However, that wasn't the only reason why Akutagawa was running so quickly.

He had finally gained what he lacked.

His insides burned and his hair stood on end from an emotion so powerful that it seemed ready to burst from his throat.

That emotion was hatred, the first Akutagawa had ever clearly felt. Despite his knowledge that he was heading toward the gates of hell, this feeling only continued to grow and consume him. He would not hesitate. He was simply going to slit his enemies' throats with a single blade as his hatred dictated him to do.

I have finally gained hatred. Now, I am no longer a mangy, filthy cur. I am a human with emotion; ergo, all that remains is how I shall exact my revenge.

Akutagawa had an idea where the enemy would appear: on the road to where the trade deal was going to take place. He raced through the rugged forest, his only company the silver-gray fog and the steam whistle that blared in the distance.

He wasn't afraid of death, for he believed that hell would be far more pleasant than this place. Nor did he fear the pain of dying, as day after endless day was nothing but torture.

Days without food where he was fighting over weeds just to survive.

Days where he would wake up on a snowy morning to find the friend by his side never to awaken from their eternal slumber.

If this was what life was meant to be—if this was the fated price to pay for the right to breathe and exist, then he would have his revenge. He wanted to take out as many enemies as he could before thrusting his juvenile corpse through the gates of hell. That was the best way Akutagawa could get revenge—revenge against the curse of ever being born.

And then he arrived. On the other side of the fog were a few flickering red lights—the lit ends of the cigarettes a group of outlaws were smoking. It was them. There were six men, each armed with a pistol at his hip. They seemed rather laid-back; perhaps they still had some time to kill before their trade deal

took place. Akutagawa hid within the thickets and watched the outlaws. They were clearly experienced criminals used to killing. And there were six of them compared to one little boy. No child stood a chance against this many.

So what? thought Akutagawa. He was carrying the weight of eight dead friends, so there was no reason for him to give in based simply on numbers.

Akutagawa undid his shirt and looked down at the bandaged wound on his side. It was the injury he got when he was grazed by a bullet while escaping the attack earlier that day. He tore off the bandages before thrusting his fingers into the wound as hard as he could, forcing fresh blood to spill out.

“Ngh...”

Akutagawa grunted in agony while smearing the blood over his face to make it look like his injury was more severe. He then began approaching the outlaws.

“H-help...,” came Akutagawa’s trembling voice from the forest road. “I was attacked by two men with guns...”

The six outlaws turned around as the young boy approached them, clutching his chest while dragging his leg along the ground. He was breathing heavily as the moonlight illuminated his blood-painted face.

“Huh? A kid?”

“What’re you doin’ out all alone at a time like this?”

“Just down the road...there was a carjacking...by two masked men... It was a truck transporting government notes...,” stammered Akutagawa in a voice as feeble as that of a tiny, frightened animal. “I accidentally saw one of their faces after they killed the guards and stole the money...so they started chasing after me to make sure I wouldn’t be able to tell anyone...”

“Uh-huh, so...you witnessed a theft, huh? This sure is a dangerous town we live in,” joked one of the outlaws while he calmly raised his gun. “Sorry, kid. But if I were that thief, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowin’ you were still alive. Lemme put you outta your misery. Consider it an act of mercy.”

“Hold on. Don’t be so hasty.” Another outlaw stopped him. “This here’s a golden opportunity, no?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Transporters carrying government notes have hundreds of millions in cash at a time to adjust the domestic circulation of bills. We could retire on money like that.”

“Wait... So you’re sayin’ you wanna protect this kid?”

“Nah, I’m saying we should do it for the money. Think about it. What happens *after* stealing money from the government is the hard part. The military police, the city police, the Ministry of Finance’s prosecutors, investigators with the bank—everyone whose reputation is on the line will come running like ants. But they wouldn’t be coming for us this time. They’d be going after the guys who attacked the transporter. They’d never even consider coming after us. We had nothing to do with it, after all. It’s easy money. They’d be looking for two men, not six. Low risk, high reward.”

The six outlaws exchanged glances.

“I guess, but...”

“We’ve still got plenty of time before the deal goes down.”

“...Wanna do it?”

“This whole thing’s kinda sudden. We’re not prepared.”

“Didja not hear the part about ‘hundreds of millions’? No way we can pass up that much dough. What, you scared?”

“Pfft. Like hell I am. I’m fine getting an extra payday, but what’s gonna happen when we meet up with the Port Mafia later tonight?”

“They’d keep their mouths shut once we give ’em their ten percent. C’mon, all we gotta do is keep our story straight if things go south. We were just trying to help an injured boy who was being attacked. It’s half-true, right? And if the kid happens to get hit with a stray bullet, well...”

The outlaw smirked, then pointed the muzzle of his gun in Akutagawa’s direction. The other five men grinned as if they knew he was hinting he was going to kill the young boy after they got their money.

“Hey, kid. What’d these two guys look like? You know what kinda weapons

they had?”

Akutagawa shook his head. “I don’t know much about weapons...but I did pick up one of the bullets.”

“That’ll work. We’ll know what kind of gun they were using. Lemme see.”

“Okay...”

Akutagawa approached the man and held out his palm. The outlaw crouched down and leaned closer to get a better look at the bullet under the moonlight.

There was a slicing sound. A slit appeared horizontally on the man’s neck, followed by fresh blood spewing everywhere. He gave a quizzical stare, but his life came to an abrupt end before he even realized that Akutagawa had turned his sleeve into a blade and slit his throat.

“What...?!”

Before the other five outlaws could even process what was going on, Akutagawa spun around, then immediately thrust his blade into the nearest one’s gut, sliding it right through the opening of his bulletproof vest. The skill-infused blade extended within his stomach while stirring his entrails. Right after Akutagawa pulled out the blade, blood and shredded guts immediately spewed out of the wound like a fountain. The outlaw collapsed.

“You...!”

The first outlaw to realize what was going on aimed his gun at Akutagawa. He was about two steps away from the boy, making him out of the skill’s reach, so Akutagawa leaned forward and threw himself at the outlaw. Right as he hit the ground, he swung his arms at the man’s ankles as if he were mowing grass with a scythe. The outlaw howled as his legs were severed from the ankle down before collapsing. Blood sprayed out of his wounds and onto Akutagawa’s face.

Three left.

“This little shit’s a skill user! Shoot! Kill him!”

The three outlaws simultaneously fired. Akutagawa rolled on the ground until he could hide behind the nearest body and use it as a shield. The corpse bounced as it took the gunfire.

He had defeated three men, but this was where the real fight would begin. He wouldn't be able to take them by surprise anymore. There was no way for Akutagawa to kill three men armed with long-range weapons, since he needed to be up close to attack. But he felt neither fear nor hesitation. The Heartless Dog's gaze never wavered. If he felt anything right now, it was a hint of elation. He had already defeated three of the outlaws.

How many evildoers' souls would he need to take with him to hell? Three? Four? ...The more the merrier, of course.

Akutagawa observed the clothes of the dead body he was hiding behind. Stuffed inside the corpse's pockets were two grenades. Akutagawa used his own clothing to grab the grenades and pull the pins, then waited for a brief moment before simultaneously launching them at the enemy. One of the men absorbed the entire blast, scattering pieces of his flesh into the air and even above the treetops. Taken aback by the raining flesh of their comrade, the two surviving outlaws promptly hid behind some trees.

"Wh-what the hell is with this kid?!" one of the men shrieked in horror. "He's outta his mind! Attacking us all by himself... Does he even value his own damned life?!"

"A good question." Akutagawa got to his feet. "Thanks to you all...I think I am about to find the answer."

He dashed forward with a swiftness that belied his serious injuries. It was a speed that could only be maintained by someone who didn't care how many tendons they tore or bones they broke.

The outlaws fired their guns at him as he drew closer. A bullet moving at the speed of sound passed through Akutagawa's right shoulder, creating a trail of blood behind him. And yet, he did not slow down.

Akutagawa leaped into the air and lunged forward, biting one outlaw's neck. He then wrapped his clothes around the outlaw so he couldn't escape. Akutagawa's canines sank into the man's flesh as he clamped his jaw down as hard as he could until he bit through the outlaw's throat, carotid artery and all.

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

Blood gushed out of the criminal's neck and straight up into the air. Akutagawa kicked off his sternum and landed on the ground with the man's flesh and blood still dangling from his mouth. Akutagawa stood back up.

"How long has it been since I last tasted fresh meat?" he muttered as he spat out the fresh blood. His bloodstained lips curled into a fiendish smile.

The Silent Mad Dog.

A heartless, savage beast.

This Akutagawa illuminated by the moonlight was what his friends both feared and relied on—the ultimate beast.

After turning to face the remaining enemy, Akutagawa uttered:

"Just one left."

"Eek...!"

The last outlaw shrieked from the depths of his throat. He pointed the gun in his trembling hand at the beast and wildly fired. However, Akutagawa simply marched through the hail of bullets. His eyes had an eerie, animalistic glow while blood dripped from his teeth. Gunfire whizzed by his ears and pierced his clothes. But even then, his expression remained still. Bullets went through his shoulders, his earlobes, his ribs—shattering everything in their path. But even then, Akutagawa did not slow down.

"Stay back! Stay back—stay back, stay baaack...!"

One of the bullets passed through Akutagawa's thigh, and he immediately stumbled forward, unable to use the muscles in his leg. Another barrage of bullets showered the kneeling child as the outlaw unloaded his clip until he was shooting nothing but blanks. That did not stop the outlaw from continuously pulling the trigger, however. Akutagawa glared at his foe—one of the men responsible for his friends' deaths—then smiled with evident satisfaction...and collapsed face forward. No longer did he move as the warm blood continued to pour out from every cut on his body.

"I-is he...? Is he dead?"

The outlaw looked down at Akutagawa in disbelief. He timidly approached the

body and kicked a shoulder. The body didn't even budge. He kicked his head. Still nothing. He kicked Akutagawa's arm.

Beast-like claws grabbed his ankle.

"I thought I'd had enough killing for the night...but I'm feeling a little greedy."

Akutagawa looked up at the man with a gruesome smirk.

"I think I'll take all six souls with me."

His blade wrapped around the outlaw's ankle, piercing through the flesh until reaching the bone. Akutagawa's clothing spun like a rotating saw through the man's leg, carving up his blood vessels and slicing his nerves. The man screamed in agony as his foot was slowly rendered into mincemeat, starting from his toes. Akutagawa then grabbed the man's leg and moved his blade farther up. Blood and saliva rained down on Akutagawa as his opponent struggled to escape, but Akutagawa refused to let go. By the time everything below the man's knee had been reduced to chunks of meat, the outlaw started to go into convulsions, then made a whistling sound before drawing his last breath. The intense pain triggered a trigeminal-vagal reflex, and every vein in his body dilated beyond capacity. He died from shock.

After making sure the last man was dead, Akutagawa let go of his leg, then rolled onto his back and stared at the cold, starry sky. A silence reigned over the woods as if the world had ended and he was the only one left.

"Ha...ha-ha...ha..."

Hollow laughter reflexively escaped his lungs. He had avenged his friends...all by himself. The battle couldn't have gone any better. But even that couldn't fill the hole in Akutagawa's heart. He burned his own life force as fuel to kill the enemy, and his wish came true. He was going to die as well, surely within half an hour or so. However, right as he came to that realization, a certain question came to mind, somewhat passively:

Who killed me?

Akutagawa alone had decided to throw away his life to defeat the enemy. Therefore, he'd killed himself in a sense. But he had never desired a fate such as this. Not once. He felt that his life was worthless, so he despised it. He was

forced to feel that way, hence why he ended up in this situation.

“But why do I have to die?” muttered Akutagawa as he stared at the frigid stars. It was a question that would never be solved. He never even expected an answer. And yet, an answer surprisingly came:

“That’s because you’re not living of your own free will, Akutagawa.”

Akutagawa was taken aback and turned his gaze in the direction of the voice. A shadowy figure was sitting on a tree stump by the road. It was slender and dressed in a black coat, but the moonlight cast a shadow over its face. All Akutagawa could make out were the figure’s disheveled black hair and white bandages. He doubted what he was seeing. *How long has this person been here? There shouldn’t be anyone else around...*

“Who...are...you...?” Akutagawa’s hoarse voice came out like a whisper. “Are you...one of them...?”

Six outlaws had ambushed and killed his friends, but it was entirely plausible that there were others involved somewhere else at the time.

“I actually came to invite you to our little group, but...I’ve changed my mind. It’s human nature to lash out with violence. But if hurting others is your natural instinct...then you are nothing more than a mindless beast.”

Its voice was young and could even pass for a teenage boy. The young man in the black coat hopped off the tree stump, but his face was still hidden in the shadows. And yet, Akutagawa could somehow feel his cold, distant gaze peering into his heart.

“Me...? A mindless beast...?” White-hot emotions coursed through his veins once more. “Then what...does that make...the likes of you?”

Akutagawa pushed himself up with his trembling arms. His wounds cried with immense agony, but the fire of his hatred did not fade.

“Are you saying...your acts of violence...are justified...?”

He rose to his feet, pushing against his quivering knees. Blood trickled down his body until it landed on the forest road where it immediately turned cold. Akutagawa had lost too much blood. He was in no condition to fight, let alone

even walk. He was on the verge of losing consciousness. But there was no way he was going to let himself die if there still remained an enemy's soul for the taking. Akutagawa seethed with murderous, beastly rage, yet the man in the black coat simply continued to approach him with that same icy tone.

"Are you planning on killing me? Because if so, that would make you the most foolish person in this world, Akutagawa."

"I don't care." Akutagawa growled like a wild animal. "My only wish is to make the man before me the second-most foolish person in the world."

The man in the black coat got closer to Akutagawa. It would only be a few more steps until he was in the boy's range of attack.

"You are hopelessly stupid. You know that?" The man shook his head. "You just wanted revenge? Even if it killed you? Did you not even think of what would happen to your little sister if you left her all alone in a place like this?"

An intense inner fire burned within Akutagawa like never before.

How does he know about her? Nobody saw her during the attack... Regardless, the how or why doesn't matter right now.

"You bastard...!" Every muscle in his body shrieked with rage. "Don't you dare lay a finger on my sister! I will not allow it! *Rashomon!*"

Akutagawa's clothes explosively billowed from his rage. The fabric at the edge of his shoulder gradually swelled and twisted into the head of a massive beast. His skill had evolved, gaining new form. As he raised his hand into the air, the beast lifted its head and glared at its opponent like a hungry predator.

"Die!"

He pitched forward, sending the beast straight for the man in the black coat as its fangs dug through the ground. Its speed was equal to a bullet's, and its fangs were as sharp as a guillotine's. This was the strongest attack Akutagawa had ever unleashed. However...

"Boooring."

The man casually swung his arm to the side and reduced the beast into dust like a dead leaf.

“What...?!”

Akutagawa’s eyes bulged in disbelief until the next moment when the man kicked him in the stomach, thrusting his torso skyward. Akutagawa coughed up blood and vomited before flying backward.

“You won’t be able to kill me.”

The man quietly walked toward him.

“Not when you’re this weak. I think I’ll go with that other guy for my right-hand man.”

Akutagawa’s body was at its breaking point, and his vision started fading. He could hear the man’s footsteps approaching him on the other side of the darkness.

He’s going to kill me.

But the footsteps passed right by Akutagawa and began disappearing into the distance. The man seemed to have lost interest.

“Come find me once you figure out what makes you so weak. We’ll have a rematch. I’ll be holding on to your sister until then.”



“What...?! Wait...!” moaned Akutagawa. However, his body temperature had rapidly plummeted, and he was unable to move even a single finger.

Wait! Don't take my sister! Stop! I don't care that I'm a fool, that I'm going to die—just don't hurt my sister...!

But Akutagawa couldn't voice his screams. His wishes would never take form. The tears running down his cheeks cooled as the night wind silently passed him by. Akutagawa's intense emotion would never influence the outside world but simply echo meaninglessly in the lonely darkness of the abyss.

His desires would never be heard. Such was this world he lived in.

Four and a half years passed.

#1

Detective Junichiro Tanizaki was at a loss.

The newcomer was glaring at him. He hadn't said a word ever since he took a seat across from Tanizaki. Instead, the newcomer simply sat motionlessly as he fixed Tanizaki with a penetrating gaze.

"I'm so sorry!" Tanizaki had bowed his head and apologized a few moments earlier, but the newcomer still didn't even blink.

They were in a bright café. An old piano tune with a sorrowful melody was playing in the background, almost so softly that it couldn't be heard.

There were four people sitting at the table, each a detective. They had just gone to town to buy new furniture for the newcomer and decided to stop by a café on their way back to relax. Still bowing apologetically, Tanizaki stole a glance at the newcomer's face, only to meet his frighteningly piercing gaze. "Fiendish" would be an understatement; it was as if Cerberus were staring down Tanizaki before the gates of hell. That gaze was ruthless, unrelenting—unforgiving.

Tanizaki had encountered various miscreants and criminals due to the nature of his work, but he'd never seen such a vicious look in someone's eyes before. The newcomer's name was Akutagawa. He was a young man who'd just passed the agency's entrance exam the day before.

"Uh...," muttered Tanizaki in a feeble voice before timidly continuing, "I'm really sorry about yesterday. Even if it was a test, for me to pretend to be a mad bomber and threaten to kill you was just... Uh... You're angry, aren't you?"

To no one's surprise, Akutagawa still didn't reply. He took the Armed Detective Agency's entrance examination yesterday where he had to protect

the other detectives from a bomber who was played by Tanizaki. Tanizaki had taken a woman hostage, then barricaded himself inside the building and demanded to see the agency's president. Nevertheless, Akutagawa was able to subdue him within seconds.

"J-Jun, everything's going to be okay. Your sister's right here with you," assured Naomi in an attempt to cheer Tanizaki up. She had played the bomber's hostage.

"You've given him the silent treatment long enough," barked Kunikida, a tall, bespectacled man and seasoned detective who was sitting between Akutagawa and Tanizaki. "You passed your test yesterday. In other words, from today on, Tanizaki is your superior. You can't just stare at him in silence for the rest of your life."

Akutagawa swiveled his eyes over to Kunikida with palpable intensity.

"Erk!"

Even the highly experienced detective couldn't stop himself from yelping when he came face-to-face with the boy's fearsome glare. A child would've burst into tears at the sight.

Tanizaki suddenly glanced over in Kunikida's direction. His gaze silently asked:

What should we do, Kunikida? The new guy is really mad. We did threaten him and put him in danger with the whole bomber and hostage thing, after all... He's not going to kill us, is he?

Kunikida's expression remained hard as a rock, but he replied with his own silent gaze:

Don't be stupid. What we did yesterday was all an act. It was a test he needed to take to join our agency. Not only that, but he passed with flying colors. Even if he did happen to attack us, we have two seasoned agents here. He wouldn't stand a chance. At any rate, it's you he's angry with, not me.

Uh, Kunikida, why are you acting like this has nothing to do with you?

"Unforgivable," the newcomer suddenly muttered, causing both of them to slightly jump out of their seats.

Tanizaki's mind went numb. *He's...gonna kill me, isn't he?*

"The girl who played the hostage—is she your sister?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah... Naomi's my little sister."

Akutagawa's expression remained emotionless as he took a sip of water. He then said, "You should cherish your sister. Protect her."

Tanizaki repeated those words three times to himself until it suddenly hit him.

"...Wait... A-are you in a bad mood...because I was rough with Naomi while she played the hostage? Is that it?"

Still fixing Tanizaki with a piercing gaze, Akutagawa nodded so faintly that it was almost impossible to notice.

"Oh my. Really? You don't have to worry about me, though. See? My brother and I are *extremely* close." Naomi snuggled up to Tanizaki and began rubbing her cheek on his collar. "I actually requested to play the hostage because I wanted Jun to tie me up."

Akutagawa emotionlessly looked back and forth between the two as they shared an intimate moment, then said, "I see. Then there is nothing to worry about. It appears I jumped to a hasty conclusion."

The waitress just happened to be walking by, so he turned to her and asked, "Could I get the sweet red bean soup and some roasted green tea?"

"Sure thing!" the waitress replied with a smile and a nod before leaving to place the order.

Akutagawa then faced forward once more and took another sip of his water. All the while, his gaze remained as sharp and penetrating as the hound of Hades.

Is the new guy...?

Tanizaki and Kunikida exchanged glances. It appeared they shared the same opinion: The newcomer was not glaring at them out of malice. This was just how he always looked...as frightening as that was.

Ryuunosuke Akutagawa was an orphan who had been found by the riverbank

on the verge of starving to death. Nobody at the agency really knew much about him or his background. They weren't told why Akutagawa was on the verge of death, nor were they told how he was found and taken in. All they knew was that he was a highly talented skill user who could manipulate his clothes into any shape he wanted and that he joined the detective agency to search for someone.

"Anyway, what's taking that man so long?" Kunikida retrieved his pocket watch and began restlessly tapping it with his finger. "He was supposed to be here already. *Sigh...* The man takes in an orphan half starved to death and convinces him to join the agency, only to abandon the boy like this... Honestly."

"He can be pretty unpredictable—that's for sure," remarked Tanizaki as if to mediate. "But when I called him a moment ago, he said he'd be here in five minutes, so let's wait a little longer."

"Easier said than done..."

Kunikida glanced at Akutagawa, who was blankly staring off into space. But the look in his eyes was still demonic, like a torturer of the underworld. A cold silence reigned over their table; theirs was the quietest in the entire café thanks to the newcomer's stiff demeanor.

"Hey, uh... Akutagawa?" Tanizaki timidly squeaked. "Is, uh... Oh, I know. Is there anything else you wanted to order?"

"No," replied Akutagawa with that same penetrating gaze.

And then there was silence.

Tanizaki felt like he was slowly withering from the inside.

Sheesh, this conversation's going nowhere... Am I even gonna be able to work with this guy...?

His younger sister, Naomi, picked up on how he was feeling and bluntly asked with a smile, "By the way, Akutagawa, what did you do before you joined the agency?"

Tanizaki secretly squealed with joy.

Good job, Naomi! That's my little sis. I knew I could count on you.

Akutagawa pondered for a few moments before replying, “My past is like the withering winds—a pebble among gravel. I am always moving, never staying long in one place. I’ve never had a real job. I simply wandered the slums day in and day out.”

In other words, he basically did nothing, thought Tanizaki. *Huh. That’s surprising.*

“But surely you would’ve had no problem finding a job with an amazing skill like that, right?” said Tanizaki. “You could’ve been a bodyguard or security guard or something. I bet lots of places would’ve hired you.”

Akutagawa, however, lowered his gaze without saying a word. Perhaps he wasn’t comfortable talking about this. After thinking for a moment, Tanizaki asked, “Then...what are you into? Anything you particularly like or dislike?”

“Not really.”

The brief reply almost sent Tanizaki into a mental breakdown, but he fired himself back up and doubled down.

“Well, uh... Let’s say you had to choose something.”

“If I had to...? Hmm...”

Akutagawa’s gaze wandered as his mind went to work.

“I enjoy...tea, figs, and red bean soup... I dislike—If I had to choose, I suppose it’d be fava beans, mandarin oranges, and...stray dogs.”

“Oh? Stray dogs, huh?”

Tanizaki’s face lit up with a smile.

So he hates dogs? Guess he isn’t totally unusual, after all.

“I know what you mean. There are some massive stray dogs around here, and they’ll just bark at you for absolutely no reason. Scares even the adults.”

“I see,” replied Akutagawa while sipping on his drink. “A stray dog once almost chewed my arm off in the slums while I was asleep. I immediately woke up and was able to escape, but...I haven’t liked dogs since then.”

His reasoning was far more horrific than anyone imagined.

“O-oh, you don’t say...” Tanizaki shuddered as his eyes goggled in astonishment. He didn’t know what else to say, so he simply added, “That must’ve been rough.”

“No. It was nothing out of the ordinary in the slum where I grew up. One of the people I lived with was even killed and devoured by a stray dog... Of course, I made sure to slaughter each and every one in the neighborhood as payback after that.”

“O-oh...you don’t say.”

The newcomer had been through a lot, apparently. Tanizaki struggled to find something to talk about, and every time he did, he regretted it. It wasn’t long before he turned into a robot that automatically replied to everything with “You don’t say.”

“Allow me to ask something as well,” Akutagawa suddenly said. “What did you all used to do? Where did you work before joining the agency?”

“Oh my. That’s a wonderful question.” Naomi clapped her hands together and beamed. “That’s the first thing most people ask. We actually have a game where we try to guess what someone used to do before joining the agency. Right, Jun?”

“Y-yeah... We make all the new hires do it. Still...the man who found you is a tough nut to crack. Nobody’s been able to guess correctly so far, so the prize pool from everyone’s bets is now at seven hundred thousand yen. You should give it a try, too.”

Just then, the waitress appeared with a tray.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here’s your roasted green tea and—”

But the waitress wasn’t able to finish her sentence...because she had stepped on the hem of Akutagawa’s coat. She instinctively tried to lift her foot back up, but that mistake would cost her. As she pulled her foot back, her heel got caught on the fabric. She let out a small yelp as she tried to right herself, but her foot got tangled in her kimono, causing her to stumble backward until she slammed both of her hands onto a nearby table to catch herself. The tea that was on the tray flew through the air—and right over Akutagawa’s head.

“...!”

The detectives reflexively leaped out of their seats, but it was too late. The burning liquid was spilling right onto Akutagawa’s head. Naomi briefly shrieked; Kunikida and Tanizaki froze. Kunikida’s hand was on the pistol at his waist. If he hadn’t hesitated for another second, he would have been pointing the gun right at Akutagawa.

“Watch where you’re walking,” warned Akutagawa dispassionately. “You could have burned someone.”

Akutagawa had silently expanded his coat and blocked the hot liquid mere moments before it would have burned his head. He’d reacted with almost godlike speed. Tanizaki looked at Kunikida, who then peered down at the hand he’d placed on his gun almost unconsciously. Neither of them had been trying to help the waitress, nor tend to Akutagawa’s wound. Their only goal in that moment was to kill Akutagawa—because for a split second, they sensed the murderous fury surge through him like a flash of light. Theirs was an instinctive reaction in order to protect themselves from harm. Both Tanizaki and Kunikida instinctively predicted that Akutagawa was going to behead the waitress.

Akutagawa had passed the entrance exam, but he hadn’t passed the *real* test. There were still some conditions Akutagawa had to meet before he could become a detective. He saved the hostage from the bomber extremely quickly, but speed wasn’t a requirement to join the agency. A detective must possess the self-discipline and steadfast morals needed to protect the people—an honorable spirit that does not waver in even the most extreme situations. That was the policy of the president of the agency, Fukuzawa. The entrance exam had another rule as well: The examinee must not know they are being tested.

Akutagawa saved the hostage so quickly that he still hadn’t gotten the chance to demonstrate how his mind worked. Therefore, he would only serve as a temporary member of the agency for now, and the real entrance examination would take place at a later date, when his fate would be decided. In other words, both Tanizaki and Kunikida were in the middle of a mission. Their objective was to gauge whether Akutagawa was truly fit to join the agency, and if he proved to be wicked, they were to immediately dispose of him before anyone got hurt.

Kunikida took a nervous breath, then peeled his fingers off his pistol. The newcomer was a mystery to him. He couldn't read him, nor tell how he was feeling. All he could see was his piercing gaze and powerful skill. But at his core, was Akutagawa good or evil?

Both Kunikida and Tanizaki wondered: Why was someone like Akutagawa joining the agency? What was *that man* thinking when he recommended Akutagawa?

Just then, the door to the café opened, and a tall man walked inside. He had his back to the light, casting a shadow over his face.

"Oh," squeaked Tanizaki after turning around to see who came in. "Glad you could make it. What took you so long?"

"You're late," commented Kunikida after looking over at the new arrival. "The newcomer you invited caused a scene while you were out doing who knows what. Hurry up and take care of it."

The tall man scratched his head and muttered, "Yeah, sorry about that."

The ceiling lights gradually illuminated the man's face as he walked farther into the café. That man was—



Nighttime rendered the seaside warehouse district the darkest place in the world. Neither streetlights nor moonlight reached this pitch-black abyss so dark you couldn't even see your own hand in front of you.

Just then, several screams rang out.

"Somebody, help!"

"Ahhh! Stay back!"

"Help me! Please...! Anybody!"

Their simultaneous cries were reminiscent of a battle hymn, with the sounds of something breaking, shattering, and a sticky substance splattering across the floor serving as the musical accompaniment.

And yet, none of these noises could disturb the silence outside of the

warehouse district. Every single sound was absorbed by the dense, heavy darkness like a sponge.

They were in a spacious warehouse used for storing imported goods. Inside were countless wooden boxes stacked on shelves all the way to the ceiling. The pitch-black sky of the new moon loomed cruelly over the skylight on the building's high ceiling.

"Stop! Stay back! Stay back! No...! I don't wanna die! No, no, no! Don't do this! I—"

One by one, the screams vanished into the abyss as gunfire created sporadic bursts of light. The flickering clearly illuminated the individuals' faces with each shot. They were mercenaries—a fully armed platoon of over twenty seasoned soldiers who were frantically trying to escape the darkness.

"Don't shoot! You'll hit one of our men!" shouted a soldier. "Bullets don't work on him! Switch to armor-piercing shells! Use your tactical flashlights to locate the target!"

"I can't! The enemy will find me if I turn on my flashlight!"

"The enemy can already see us! If we don't find them soon, we're all gonna —"

Those were the last words he ever spoke. His voice suddenly stopped and was replaced by the sound of his throat being slit. The air whistled out of his lungs in a silent scream. Another scream echoed from behind the group, causing them all to turn around.

It was a white beast.

The creature, practically the size of a small car, was on top of one of the soldiers. It sank its enormous jaws into the soldier's throat.

"He's here! Fire! Fire!!"

Everyone fired their gun at the beast in unison, but it twisted its head, snapping the victim's neck in half before nimbly leaping back into the darkness, leaving the soldier's body behind to be pelted by countless bullets. The firing soon stopped, and darkness returned. It was as if the beast had vanished into

thin air.

“It... It wasn’t just a rumor...!” yelled one soldier on the verge of tears. “He’s real—the beast of calamity...the Port Mafia’s White Reaper really does exist...”

The sounds of cracking and shrieking reverberated in sequence from every direction. The mercenaries couldn’t even make a defensive formation because they had no idea where the enemy was. They couldn’t even choose a direction to retreat in. All they could hear over their two-way radios was screaming and shouting. This was no longer a battle but a slaughter, nothing more than the natural outcome of mere humans trying to fight against darkness itself.

“Fall back! Regroup!” the leader desperately shouted into his handheld transceiver. “There won’t be anyone to stop the Port Mafia’s invasion if we lose here! Your superiors, your friends—everyone is gonna be sent home in a body bag with our heads removed if we don’t stop that thing!” He continued yelling orders as he pulled the pin out of a flash-bang grenade.

“When I give the signal, the Odd Squad will fall back to the entrance while the Even Squad provides covering fire!”

After the leader threw the grenade, it exploded in midair, releasing a blinding flash produced by magnesium reacting to oxygen. The room immediately lit up as if it were high noon.

“Now! Fire!”

The leader’s frantic shout echoed throughout the storehouse until it was swallowed by the abyss. Not a single gunshot could be heard.

“The hell is going on? Even Squad, I said...” His frustrated voice gradually withered as he came to a certain realization. “Don’t tell me...”

Something quietly emerged from the darkness before him. Its white forelimbs didn’t even make a sound. Its eyes burned gold as a soldier’s forearm dangled from its bloodied jaw. This was a giant, carnivorous beast with white fur.

That was when the leader realized there would be no gunfire, for there wasn’t a single living soldier left in the warehouse.

“Is everyone...? Is everyone dead...?”

“That’s right,” replied the white beast.

Startled, the leader aimed the muzzle of his gun at the beast, but what the attached tactical flashlight illuminated was no beast but a boy. He had white hair, and his bangs were cut with a slant, which complemented his innocent features. He wore a black overcoat that went all the way up to his throat, almost completely covering his entire body as it fluttered in the faint breeze.

“So it was true...,” babbled the leader in shock. “The White Tiger—the Port Mafia’s White Reaper—really is just a boy.”

The youth gently nodded. “This is the end,” he declared softly. “You plotted to assassinate Port Mafia’s boss. I’m impressed you were able to keep it a secret from us until the actual day of the assassination. You’re a real professional.”

There was no animosity in his eyes, nor was there any sadistic pleasure from slaughtering others. An overpowering silence and darkness enveloped the boy—both a blessing and a curse in equal measure.

“But while you and your men are professional assassins, our boss is also a professional...when it comes to people attempting to assassinate him. Highly trained killers sneak into our base almost every day in an attempt to take his life, but not one has ever been successful. Most don’t even make it past the lobby on the first floor...just like your group.”

“...You little shit...”

The leader noticed his fingers were trembling. The hands of a seasoned soldier, who had fought in countless battles against numerous armies and yet never broke into a cold sweat in his life, were shaking before a mere teenager.

This teenage boy, however, didn’t look human. He was death itself, here to respectfully see the man off to his grave.

In which case...

“I’ve been waiting for you, Reaper.”

The leader then pulled a wireless device around the size of his fist out of his pocket.

“We may have no chance of winning now, but that doesn’t mean we have to

lose.”

The Port Mafia teenager narrowed his eyes.

“Do you know what this is? It’s a detonator.” The leader pressed the button on the device with his thumb. “Did you really think we just randomly chose this warehouse as our war zone? This building is where we store our explosives, and this is the detonator to every bomb in here.”

The teenager’s eyes flickered a dark golden hue, and his pupils stretched into slits like a cat’s.

“What—?”

“That’s far enough, kid.”

The platoon leader raised the device into the air, showing his thumb already pressing the button.

“You see this? They call this a dead man’s switch. The bombs don’t detonate the moment you push the switch. They detonate when you take your finger off it. In other words, if you kill me, then my finger’s coming off this button, and I’m turning you into dust with me.”

If the teenager were to kill the leader, then everyone would die in the blast or when the building came crumbling down. If he were to run, the leader would detonate the bombs, and everyone would still die. Even trying to steal the detonator would result in pulling the man’s finger off the button, and once again, everyone would die.

“I’m a soldier, and I plan on dying that way.”

The platoon leader grabbed his gun with his free hand while the other was still pressing down the button on the detonator.

“I am going to fight and die on the battlefield alongside my comrades. But it won’t be that bad, seeing as I get to take you along with me.”

“I see you’re not afraid of dying. I’m jealous,” admitted the teenager with hint of sorrow—or perhaps some kind of similar emotion—in his voice. “Because I’m afraid to die. I’m afraid to get hurt. I’m afraid to get shot and bleed. That’s why I became the Reaper...because if I merge with death itself, then death will never

be able to find me.”

“You’re ‘afraid to die’? Are you saying that’s why you killed my men?” The leader squinted. “I guess that means releasing this button can instill fear in you, huh? Couldn’t ask for a better reward.”

He briefly smirked with a slight twitch of his lip, then let go of the button.

“...”

Nothing happened. The platoon leader looked at his thumb...but it was still pushing down the button. He pulled his hand away to peel it off the button, but his thumb and the detonator remained floating in the air.

“N-no...”

A white blade had quietly slid through the base of his thumb, cutting it clean off. He reflexively tried to shoot his gun with his other hand, but his finger was already missing. His index finger, which was touching the trigger, was now lying on the floor.

“Can I kill him?” asked a young voice.

A shadowy figure that melted into the darkness even more fluidly than the tiger had was gently clutching the leader’s thumb and detonator.

“There’s no need, Kyouka,” the boy replied softly.

A white hand and white dagger emerged from the darkness behind the platoon leader with its sharp point aimed precisely at his throat. Hiding in the darkness, the dagger’s wielder was a teenage girl wearing a kimono. She had long, jet-black hair and chillingly pale, almost porcelain skin.

“But he tried to kill you,” complained the girl called Kyouka, her voice as quiet as snow gently falling upon the ground.

“I know. But the boss gave orders to let one go. He wants one of them alive so they can go tell their superiors how easily their platoon was slaughtered.”

“But...,” the girl said in a childish tone. She shifted her dagger slightly and faintly pressed it into the leader’s throat, drawing blood.

“It’s fine. He’ll never again be able to hold a gun without those fingers, so we

don't have to worry about him ever coming back for revenge."

The girl tilted her head to the side somewhat, and her pitch-black hair lightly brushed against her cheek. Her complexion was so translucent that it was as if she were about to vanish into thin air.

"Well, if he isn't a threat to you...," said the girl, hardly even moving her lips as she slipped her dagger back into her pocket. She then backed away from the platoon leader with a flowing motion reminiscent of plankton in the ocean depths.

"Thanks."

The girl's expression remained unchanged, but her eyes gave the impression that she was smiling.

"Th-this can't...be happening...," the leader painfully moaned as he applied pressure onto the nubs where his fingers used to be. "The assassin girl...Kyouka Izumi...? The 'Thirty-Five-Man Killer'...? Impossible... Why is she with Port Mafia's White Reaper? I thought she betrayed the Mafia and disappeared...!"

"She did betray the Mafia once," answered the boy.

"But I came back." Kyouka gently nestled against the boy. "Everything I did... was for him."

They were both still. It was as if the warehouse grew even more still each time the two pale figures spoke amid the shadows.

"You said you planned on dying like a soldier, and I respect that. Therefore, if you wish to fight a battle you have no chance of winning, then you're free to do so," the boy suggested in almost a whisper. "So if you do decide to fight me, I'll have no choice but to do everything in my power to kill you so that I can avoid death."

The platoon leader glared at both skill users with bloodshot eyes, but he eventually dropped his shoulders.

The light sound of metal sliding across the floor spoke for the platoon leader. He had thrown his gun down.

"Thank you very much."

After bowing, the boy began walking toward the exit, and Kyouka followed him. They walked right past the soldier without even glancing in his direction as they slowly approached the door. The platoon leader then turned around and stared at their backs. They walked away as if there was no longer anybody behind them.

“Hey, kid... What’s your name?” asked the platoon leader. He wasn’t expecting an answer, but he got one, surprisingly.

“Atsushi Nakajima.”

The young man’s clear voice reverberated throughout the room.

Atsushi Nakajima...

The soldier could feel it in his gut: That name and what happened tonight was going to haunt him for the rest of his life. He would be overcome with fear every time he saw darkness or a wild animal. He might never again sleep soundly through the night as the smell of blood and fear would surely haunt him in his nightmares. His life as a soldier ended here. He would never be able to recover from this.



The platoon leader dropped to his knees. Even after the footsteps faded into the distance and the dark silence returned, he remained curled up in a ball, trembling like a child.

After retiring from the warehouse, Kyouka and Atsushi walked down the path along the seaside, coldly lit under the streetlamps. But less than a minute later, Atsushi suddenly lost his balance and fell to his knees.

“Are you okay?”

Kyouka rushed over.

“I-I’m...fine, Kyouka,” Atsushi painfully moaned. “I was just...transformed...for a long time tonight... That’s all...”

Kyouka swiftly opened Atsushi’s overcoat, exposing his neck, which was hidden beneath his tall stand-up collar.

A large, sturdy iron choker was strapped around Atsushi’s neck. Both sides were adorned with clawlike spikes. Each spike dug into his skin, sending several streams of blood trickling down his body.

“You need to take that off.”

Kyouka reached out to remove the choker.

“It’s fine.” Atsushi groaned in agony. “Without this restraint and the pain...I can’t control the tiger’s power. I’d be putting you in danger if I ever lost control.”

“But—”

“Allow us to take you back, Sir Atsushi.”

A group of men in black suits were standing in the darkness where the streetlamps’ light couldn’t reach.

“Hiro...tsu...” Atsushi painfully smirked while holding the back of his neck. “And everyone in Black Lizard, too... Thanks for...keeping watch for us...”

The dozen or so suited men bowed in unison.

“It appears you have annihilated the enemy as planned. Excellent work, sir.” The middle-aged gentleman standing at the head of the group faintly nodded at

Atsushi. “Now, if you would please come back with us to headquarters for treatment. You can report to the boss after that.”

“All right,” Atsushi said with a nod. “The boss’s plan went smoothly as always... We lured the enemy into the darkness and annihilated them. He even knew where to place Kyouka...because he saw through their bomb tactic.”

Atsushi unsteadily pushed off his knee and stood back up.

“I need to see the boss right away. I’ve already got another mission lined up,” said Atsushi while looking straight ahead. “That man saved me from hell and let me join the organization. Whatever he wants me to do, I do.”

Atsushi then began to walk, carrying the weight of darkness on his shoulders but wearing an innocent expression on his face.

“Tell the boss—tell Dazai I’ll be there soon.”



The door to the café opened, and a tall man walked inside.

“Oh,” squeaked Tanizaki after turning around to see who came in. “Glad you could make it. What took you so long?”

“You’re late,” commented Kunikida after looking over at the new arrival. “The newcomer you invited caused a scene while you were out doing who knows what. Hurry up and take care of it.”

The tall man scratched his head and muttered, “Yeah, sorry about that.”

He tottered over to their table, faced the waitress who had tripped a moment ago and was exhaustingly wiping the floor, then quietly placed his order: “I’ll have the curry.”

He then took a seat next to Akutagawa. Dressed in a sand-colored coat, the man had reddish-copper hair and a five-o’clock shadow. It was difficult to get a read on him from his expression. It always seemed that he was both concentrating on something, yet thinking about nothing at the same time.

“So? Why were you late, Oda?” asked Kunikida.

“The old lady at the tobacco shop down the street kept talking and wouldn’t

let me go,” Oda said simply.

“Again?” Kunikida frowned. “Chatty old folks really seem to like you. At any rate, although it’s wonderful that you respect your elders, you can’t be three hours late to work. You have to start saying no to them from time to time.”

“I did. Nobody takes me seriously,” Oda replied, looking incredulous.

“I really can’t tell when you’re being serious sometimes...,” replied Kunikida with a troubled stare. “At least make it look like you’re not enjoying yourself so they’ll realize you want to go home.”

“I do, but nobody notices.”

“Really? Show me.”

Oda stared blankly at Kunikida in silence. After a few seconds had passed, Kunikida’s expression turned suspicious, and he asked, “How much longer is this going to take?”

“I’m doing it right now.”

“Oh... Uh-huh...,” replied Kunikida with an exhausted sigh.

Tanizaki noticed the troubled looks on their faces and tried to change the subject.

“Uh... Akutagawa, I’m sure you already know who he is, but allow me to formally introduce you. This is Sakunosuke Oda. He’s been a detective at the agency for two years now, and from today on, he’s going to be your mentor.”

“I look forward to working with you, Oda.” Akutagawa bowed his head reverently.

“Me too.” Oda nodded without changing his expression. “You been eating?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Right after Oda nodded, the waitress gently placed his plate of curry in front of him. Oda gave her an acknowledging look.

“If you hadn’t found me, I would have surely perished at that riverbank,” said Akutagawa.

Watching Akutagawa submissively lower his head, Kunikida mentioned, “Oda has a habit of going out of his way to help orphans in need, after all.”

“I just felt like it,” commented Oda before digging his silver spoon into the curry and taking a bite. “...This curry isn’t spicy. At all. Did they give me something off the kids’ menu?”

Oda turned around in his seat and called out to the waitress standing in the back.

“Excuse me, waitress? Do you think you could switch this—?”

That was when Akutagawa attacked Oda using one of his deadly cloth blades without any warning, seemingly out of the blue. Its sharp point was aimed straight for Oda’s head; Oda wouldn’t see it coming from his blind spot. One hit, and Oda would be swiftly and silently decapitated.

Oda used his spoon to parry the blade and send it off course...all without even looking back at what was attacking him. The cloth blade passed right by his face, scorching the air. After glancing in its direction, Oda continued, “Do you think you could switch this curry out for something a little spicier?”

The waitress let him know she would be right back with a spicy curry.

“What...?”

Meanwhile, the detectives watching the attempted murder froze in mute amazement. Eventually, Kunikida managed to squeak, “What the hell was that?”

“It’s not curry if it isn’t spicy,” Oda replied, turning to his fellow detective.

“That’s not what I meant!” shouted Kunikida. “New guy! What the hell did you just do?! Because to me, it was pretty clear you were trying to slice off his head!”

“Why do you ask?” answered Akutagawa as two more blades of fabric pierced the air. The gray blades were precisely aimed for Oda’s face and heart, but Oda slightly tilted his head to the side and leaned back, dodging both attacks. Not once did Oda ever even glance at the blades.

“Hey!”

“He suddenly tried to attack me when I found him at the riverbank,” Oda explained with the utmost nonchalance. “But when I repelled his attacks, he said he wanted me to teach him how to become stronger. I told him I didn’t know how to train people, but I could give him some guidance if he joined the agency. The rest is pretty self-explanatory.”

Oda gestured at Akutagawa, who nodded back and said, “I am very fortunate. I’ve never met someone as talented as Oda.”

Meanwhile, Akutagawa swung another blade of fabric at Oda, who smoothly parried it with his spoon.

“No...no, no, no...” Kunikida shook his head. “While Oda’s skill is extremely powerful...what kind of person tries to attack someone in the middle of a restaurant?! Enough! Go to a dojo if you want to train!”

“I wouldn’t be going through all this trouble if my enemy was at a dojo,” griped Akutagawa with a piercing glare. “I could be walking down the road when I encounter them, or inside a restaurant, or even inside a train. I need to be prepared to fight regardless of the location, or this will all have been for naught.”

“Your ‘enemy’?”

“There are apparently two people he wants to kill,” Oda said while looking at Akutagawa. “That’s why he’s been honing his skill so much.”

“One of them is a man—I have no idea who he is, nor what he looks like,” added Akutagawa. “I simply call him the ‘man in black.’ He kidnapped my younger sister, so I plan on killing him and saving her.”

“Your younger sister?” Tanizaki’s eyes opened wide as he stared at Akutagawa. “Oh... No wonder you were so angry earlier when we were talking about my sister.”

Naomi looked at Akutagawa and asked, “Do you have any idea where she might be? Any leads?”

“Not the slightest. I don’t even know if she’s still alive.” A faint light wavered in Akutagawa’s normally expressionless eyes. “But I will find her.”

“So that’s why you wanted to join the agency.” Kunikida crossed his arms. “It makes sense. You can browse the city police’s records on missing people at the agency, and you can easily get your hands on information about various underground organizations. However...”

Tanizaki took over for Kunikida with a troubled expression.

“It’s not going to be easy finding someone in a big city like this.”

“*Giggle...* It appears you’re all forgetting something,” Naomi mirthfully suggested as her lips curled into a grin. “Akutagawa, you made a wise choice joining the agency. And that’s because there isn’t an organization in the world better suited to finding your missing little sister.”

Naomi looked at everyone in an amused manner, then began speaking in a hushed voice as if she was telling a secret. “Wouldn’t you all agree? You all know as well as I do that *he* should be able to find Akutagawa’s sister.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“True...”

“You’re right.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Akutagawa, you’re going to be reunited with your sister in no time.” Naomi stood up with a smile. “Anyway, shall we go? I’m about to introduce you to the greatest detective in the world!”



Port Mafia headquarters: a black building that towered over Yokohama’s ritziest neighborhood. The outside looked like any ordinary, well-kept, newly built high-rise, but the inside was an impregnable fortress. The windows were bulletproof and explosion proof while the exterior was made specially to withstand even the impact from a tank. It had the defensive capabilities of a military stronghold.

Atsushi made his way through the building, passing by several of his silent, armed colleagues. He walked across a fancy high-pile rug fit for a throne room

before eventually reaching the end of the hallway, where he stopped before a sturdy double door.

“Boss, it’s me. Atsushi. I have arrived as requested.”

A few seconds passed.

“Come in,” demanded a voice.

“Yes, sir.”

There was a unique ambience to the boss’s sizable office space. Every high-end oddity in here was one of a kind, from the candlesticks to the desk in the center of the office. And yet at the same time, each decoration seemed somehow out of place, as if they’d wandered into this room by mistake. The presence of death filled the space.

The floor and ceiling were black. All four walls were black. One of the walls was made of special glass that could turn into a window with a view of the Yokohama skyline, but it hadn’t been used for the past four years. All this was done to protect the current Mafia boss, Dazai, from sniper and artillery fire.

“Lower your head, captain,” snapped an executive standing in the back of the room. “You’re in the presence of the boss.”

Atsushi immediately dropped to one knee and deeply bowed his head. “My sincerest apologies.”

There were two men in the room. One was a Port Mafia executive and envoy standing at attention in the back. He wore a black suit and hat. Despite his youthful appearance, he was the second-highest-ranking executive in the organization and the strongest skill user in the Mafia.

The other man—the owner of the room—was seated on a black throne in the center. He spoke into his handheld transceiver: “It’s fine, Chuuya. Good work, Atsushi. I’m glad you made it back safely.”

His voice was both majestic like a king’s and cruel like a demon’s.

Osamu Dazai—the boss of colossal underground organization Port Mafia.

Even European royalty would covet his black overcoat and shoes, which were of the highest quality.

“Th-thank you...very much, Dazai,” Atsushi nervously stammered with his head still lowered.

Chuuya’s deep voice immediately chimed in: “Scuse me, errand boy? You got a death wish? You address him as ‘boss.’”

“Come on, Chuuya. It’s fine,” Dazai assured him while crossing his legs. “Anyway, I want to talk with him alone, so go wait outside.”

“The hell?! Why?!” shouted Chuuya with a crudeness that wasn’t present only moments ago. “What’s gotten into you? He ain’t an executive or your secretary. The kid’s just an ordinary grunt. Hell, the fact that he’s even getting to see you makes this a special case as is.”

“What makes you say that? I trust Atsushi.”

“Trust don’t mean shit. What if he’s being controlled by someone’s skill or if someone planted a bomb on him? Wouldn’t be the first time something like that happened, so there’s no way I’m leavin’ you alone in here with him. I won’t allow it.”

Dazai smiled and looked at Chuuya.

“You won’t ‘allow it’? I’m not asking for permission, Chuuya. You’re an executive, and I’m the boss. And in the Mafia, orders must be followed at all costs. We must respect the chain of command.”

Chuuya remained silent with a look of clear discontent for a few moments before eventually storming off.

“Yeah, right. Do whatever you want,” he muttered as he strode past Atsushi. But after walking past him, he briefly stopped.

“Don’t even think about killing him, flunky...’cause I’m gonna be the one who kills him someday,” hissed Chuuya without even looking back at Atsushi. He then wildly threw the door open and marched out.

“Good grief... He hates me so much that he wants me dead, yet he has to protect me since I’m the boss. Seeing Chuuya struggle with both extremes is fun and all, but...I think he goes a little overboard sometimes.”

Dazai wryly smirked, then faced Atsushi once more.

“Make yourself comfortable, Atsushi.”

Atsushi stood, then wrapped his arms behind his back.

“Anyway, I heard about the mission. You annihilated the entire platoon with the exception of one soldier, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The enemy platoon you defeated was a group of mercenaries hired by a foreign military clique in the settlement, but I’m sure there’s a certain cabinet minister actually pulling the strings behind the scenes,” commented Dazai in a gentle voice while he recrossed his long legs. “We spent the past four years practically barring them from the nearby coasts. Must’ve caused them quite the headache—hence why they tried to kill me. Unfortunately for that minister, however, the attack ended in failure. I’m sure he has no end of headaches now,” joked Dazai before narrowing his eyes in glee.

Four years had gone by since Dazai took over for the previous boss, and ever since then, Port Mafia’s authority had expanded rapidly and exponentially. The courts, distribution, banks, urban development—there wasn’t a single institution within not only Yokohama but also the entire Kanto region that wasn’t influenced by the Port Mafia in some way. The Mafia’s armed forces had grown to rival even those of the government.

Each one of these great achievements came to fruition only because of the new boss Dazai’s extraordinary talents. Rumor had it he hadn’t even slept a day ever since taking over from Mori four years ago.

“Now...let me explain your next mission. Phase two of the plan ended with Akutagawa joining a Yokohama detective agency, so it’s time to prepare for phase three.”

“‘Detective agency’? ‘Phase three’?” Atsushi curiously tilted his head to the side. “What are you talking about?”

“This is big, Atsushi. So big it’ll make your head spin.” Dazai smiled. “And your work is essential to realizing this plan. I’m counting on you, Atsushi—you’re the Port Mafia’s White Reaper, a fearless assassin who slaughters his foes without even batting an eye.”

Atsushi carefully listened to those ominous words as they resonated throughout the room before being absorbed and disappearing into the walls and floor. He then said, “I’m not fearless.”

His voice was quiet and barren, like the bleached bones of the deceased on a battlefield after war.

“I’m a coward. I’m terrified of bleeding or being shot.”

“But according to the report, you annihilated seasoned soldiers without showing an ounce of emotion.”

“Yes... As scary as fighting is, I never sweat or even shake during battle. Just like a calm lake, I don’t even react to what’s happening...and it’s been that way ever since that day.”

Dazai squinted his eyes sharply. “Ever since ‘that day,’ huh?” he said. “You mean the day you ignored my orders?”

All emotion began fading from Atsushi’s expression. His already stolid visage withered until there was no discernible expression left.

“I...” His voice trembled. “I—That—What happened that day...”

Atsushi bent over and wrapped his arms around himself. His fingers were uncontrollably trembling as they dug into his joints so tightly that they turned white. He was shaking out of fear. His soul was crying out over something even deeper than death—true terror.

“No, I... I—”

“I agree that you’re timid by nature. You always used to search for an escape route even when face-to-face with an enemy. You were a scared little boy. But *that day* changed you. Do you know why?”

Atsushi was still trembling. Cold sweat rapidly dripped down the back of his neck.

“The only way to overcome fear is through fear itself. And ever since that day, you’ve been in constant terror, never allowing yourself so much as a moment to rest...which has thus robbed you of your ability to fear anything else. Never will guns, knives, or an enemy’s bloodlust ever reach the depths of your heart—

because a truly monstrous fear already lies within.”

Dazai stared icily at Atsushi, but Atsushi wasn’t listening. His legs were trembling as cold sweat poured off his body. He seemed to be on the verge of passing out at any moment.

“So you’re still unable to escape that particular fear, huh? ...The one born from his death.”

“N-no, I—I’m not a-afraid of...”

Atsushi curled up into a ball on the floor, unable to keep his entire body from trembling any longer.

“Please...give me orders...Dazai,” Atsushi somehow managed to stammer despite his chattering teeth. “Right now. I’ll never...go against orders...again. Never... Never again...”

“I’ll take your word for it,” claimed Dazai as he coldly looked down at Atsushi. “My secretary will give you the necessary documentation. You’ll find the details of your mission inside.”

A female secretary suddenly appeared from the back door without even making a sound. She was a quiet girl around the same age as Atsushi. She wore a black suit that fit like a second skin and had long black hair tied into a ponytail. Although she was simply standing in place, it was as if her eyes were absorbing all the sound around her.

“Gin, dear, hand me the map and letter.”

“Yes, sir.”

The secretary Gin handed Dazai a black envelope. Dazai then faced Atsushi and said:

“Atsushi, your next target is...the Armed Detective Agency.”



The Armed Detective Agency’s headquarters was a mess. Office supplies cluttered the spacious fourth floor of the multi-tenant building where the clerks briskly worked away at their desks. The agency staff were mainly split into two

groups: clerks and detectives. The former were in charge of accounting, handling documents, communicating and negotiating with clients, and information processing. The detectives were the ones actually involved in the investigations, from rushing to the scene of the incident to solving cases. Due to the nature of their work, every detective possessed some sort of unique skill.

...That is, everyone but *him*.

“A missing person? No thanks. I’d rather not,” grumbled Ranpo Edogawa. He had his feet kicked up on the desk and was licking a lollipop.

“Ranpo, please... Could you make an exception?”

Surrounding Ranpo with peeved expressions on their faces were the same five people who were just at the café together: Tanizaki, Oda, Kunikida, Akutagawa, and Naomi.

“The new guy Akutagawa was separated from his little sister,” said Tanizaki in an attempt to mediate. “We can’t just sit back and do nothing if something terrible’s happened to her... She was apparently kidnapped by a man in black.”

Ranpo’s eyebrow twitched. He continued staring at the ceiling but shifted his gaze to his right, then to the left, then back to his right before asking, “Got a name? What’s the guy look like?”

“I don’t know,” replied Akutagawa. “But I would recognize his voice anywhere.”

“Sigh...”

Ranpo leaned his head back and let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Why’s the world gotta be filled only with fools, ignoramuses, and screwups?”

“What?” Akutagawa narrowed his eyes sharply. “Are you implying that I’m one of those?”

“Hey, now. Come on,” pleaded Tanizaki in a fluster as he tried to calm him down.

“Listen up, because I’m only going to say this once,” began Ranpo as he straightened up. “I may be the greatest detective in the world, but I don’t investigate cases I’m not interested in. In other words, this is your problem.”

“There’s no need for an investigation,” argued Akutagawa with a pale expression. “I will find my sister—I will find Gin on my own.”

After heaving another sigh, Ranpo whipped out a piece of paper from his pocket and slid it across the desk. Akutagawa glanced at it, then fixed his eyes on Ranpo once more.

“What’s this?”

“It’s an OK Card,” said Ranpo.

“...A what?”

Twirling the lollipop in his mouth, Ranpo insouciantly replied, “I happened to hear about your motive for joining the agency beforehand, so I knew you would come to see me sooner or later. So I did some prior research and have a rough idea where she is... Your sister’s alive.”

“What?!” Akutagawa suddenly leaned forward. “Where is she?! Where is Gin?!”

“That’s where the card comes in.”

Akutagawa looked down at the card once more. It was a palm-sized, rectangular white sheet of paper separated into six boxes.

“You need to explain the situation to each detective in the agency and get them to stamp that card. Once you get everyone’s OK stamp, we’ll help you find your sister. By the way, the president already stamped it.”

In one of the six boxes was a fresh stamp with the letters *OK*. The other five spaces, however, were still blank.

“The stamp’s requirements are written on the back of the OK Card. For the most part, you’ll need to satisfy a condition or do something for someone to get them to stamp that card. What exactly you’ll be required to do...is largely left to the discretion of each detective,” admitted Ranpo as he took out a wooden stamp and rolled it across the desk.

“In other words, I need everyone’s permission to learn the whereabouts of my sister,” said Akutagawa as he appeared to be deep in thought. “But why has the president already given me his stamp?”

“Cause I’m an amazing detective,” argued Ranpo as he licked his lollipop. “Besides, it was actually the president’s idea to make that card in the first place. When I spoke to him about your situation, he told me to see that everyone welcomes and accepts the newcomer. And, well, I can’t say no to the boss.”

Akutagawa stared pensively at the card for a few moments, until all of a sudden, he grabbed it, his mind made up.

“Four and a half years. I have been searching for my sister for four and a half years. Ever since then I’ve been torn in half, bleeding imperceptibly from my severed body... Getting a few stamps on a piece of paper is nothing.”

“Just what I wanted to hear.” Ranpo smirked. “Good luck, new guy. But, well...”

Ranpo paused, and his expression grew serious. Then, almost prophetically, he said:

“...the real suffering’s gonna start after you get everyone’s stamps.”



It took around four straight weeks for Akutagawa to collect every stamp. The first to comply was Tanizaki. He didn’t require anything in return. After hearing about the card, he immediately stamped it right in front of Ranpo.

“If I were in your position...” Tanizaki grinned as he spoke. “If Naomi were ever kidnapped, I probably wouldn’t be able to wait until I got all the stamps. I bet I’d try to beat it out of Ranpo if he knew where she was, so I really respect you, Akutagawa. That’s why I don’t need anything else in return.”

Akutagawa calmly watched as Tanizaki bashfully stamped the card. He then glanced down at it before looking back up at Tanizaki.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Can I offer you some advice, though?” Tanizaki’s eyes were completely serious as he handed Akutagawa the card. “When you do find your sister...don’t hold back if the man in black tries to get in your way. Forget about your duties as a detective and what’s socially acceptable. And if you end up killing him, remember that it’s not your fault. No justice or morals are more important than

your sister.”

“Hey, now,” Kunikida interjected with a frown, but he didn’t say anything else after that. After accepting the card, Akutagawa replied, “Understood. If I manage to safely rescue my sister, you will be the first person I notify, Tanizaki.”

The next person to stamp the card was the youngest detective in the agency: Kenji Miyazawa.

“I don’t mind stamping the card right now, but...,” Kenji began in his cheerful, boyish voice. “Ranpo said to come up with some sort of requirement first...and there is a small task I need help with... Ms. Maeda mentioned she has some simple farmwork she wants done. Do you think you could help me? And you don’t need to worry if it’s your first time because I can teach you! It’s all really simple. Anyone can do it!”

The task was rice planting.

Akutagawa’s expression as he stared at vast fields of rice paddies would become the stuff of legend at the detective agency. It would be the first and last time Akutagawa, who was typically expressionless, appeared utterly lost.

“Now let’s get started!” Kenji cheerfully suggested. He was in his workwear and long boots. “Don’t worry! If we wake up early and work until the agency opens...we should be done by next week or the week after that!”

It wasn’t a mere one or two rice paddies. In the valley surrounded by mountains were beautiful paddy fields as far as the eye could see.

Are two weeks even enough?

Akutagawa’s lips mouthed those words, but he did not speak—or perhaps *couldn’t*.

“Hey, uh...? Are you sure you want to help?” Kenji apologetically asked. “I know you’re probably in a hurry, so...do you want to do something else instead?”

Akutagawa sternly glared at the rice fields for a few moments until eventually saying, “I was the one who said I would work in exchange for your stamp. Besides, where I come from, those who didn’t treat food with respect were the

first to perish... I can do this.”

He then faced the fields and took a step forward.

“Ack! You can’t work dressed like that,” Kenji said with a laugh. “You should definitely change into the work wear and long boots I got you. Oh, and this straw hat, too! You’re gonna look great! I promise!”

“...”

The first day, Akutagawa simply learned the process from Kenji and prepared for the tasks ahead. The second day, he hurt his lower back doing work he wasn’t used to. He rested on the third and fourth day. On the fifth day, he learned how to transplant rice seedlings with his skill, so his efficiency increased exponentially. Kenji mirthfully clapped his hands together and praised him.

Akutagawa spent his days testing his skill’s speed against a borrowed rice transplant machine, keeping watch to make sure there was no flooding on rainy days, and eating the rice balls the fields’ owner made for him. He quietly worked away without showing so much as a hint of displeasure.

“This takes me back to when I grew potatoes behind my place in the slums,” noted Akutagawa while he gazed at the fields.

He ran into trouble on the tenth day, though. When he headed to the fields that day, more than half the rice they planted had turned black and died. After examining the rice for some time, Kenji mentioned that the service water was most likely the cause. When they headed over to the main irrigation canal to check, they discovered factory waste that had been illegally dumped upstream and had leaked harmful soluble organic substances into the water.

The detective agency almost immediately uncovered who was behind this criminal activity after thoroughly investigating the containers the waste was in. It was a drug manufacturer with a large-scale factory. Around half the fields were ruined now. Unfortunately, the only paddies affected were the ones Kenji and Akutagawa had already worked on.

“Well, there’s no use crying over spilled milk. At least we can still finish the paddies that haven’t been ruined yet,” said Kenji.

Akutagawa wasn’t having it, though. The next day, he marched right into the

drug manufacturer's factory alone, choking the guards unconscious with his skill as he headed for the office floor. It was clear who planned the illegal dump the moment he checked the management chart, but he wanted to figure out who gave the orders, so he planned on beating that information out of the employee responsible. Akutagawa had every intention of doing this until he figured out who was truly pulling the strings behind the scenes.

But right as Akutagawa was about to open the door to the office and go inside, someone called out to him from behind and stopped him. Standing there were Kenji, Tanizaki, and Oda.

"Let's go home," suggested Kenji.

"This is nothing, really," Kenji assured Akutagawa as they walked back home. "Natural disasters are far more brutal and unfair: flooding, cold-weather damage, drought, pests. Sometimes, you spend years working on something, only for it to be wiped out in a single night. But half the crops survived this time. Plus, the agency will be able to sue the criminal for damages once we prove who was behind the illegal dumping. It's not like we can get any compensation from the sun or insects, so we should consider ourselves lucky."

"It still doesn't sit well with me." Akutagawa fixed Kenji with a piercing gaze. "Compensation? So you're permitted to do evil as long as you pay for it? That means the rich can do anything they want. Perhaps there's only one thing in this world that can deter acts of evil: retaliation. Display your enemy's head by the roadside for all to see. Punish and instill fear into your foes. There is no other way to protect yourself...and there never was."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. You're probably right," replied Kenji after pondering for a brief moment.

Neither of them spoke for a while after that. They continued walking in silence until eventually, they found themselves back at the rice-field paddies. The reddish-orange evening sun glittered off the water filling each paddy as the shadow of night slowly crept over the mountains' ridges.

"Night will fall, and morning will break," began Kenji while gazing at the paddies. "Spring will come, then autumn. Everything happens in halves: Plants grow; then they wither away. Animals produce offspring, then perish..."

becoming the soil that we live on. I've gradually learned over time that nature works in halves like that. When something awful happens—like a storm or mudslide—it sometimes feels like the bad stuff is never going to end. But nature is both the good and the bad... That's what it means to live. At least, that's how we view things in my village."

"It doesn't make sense to me," admitted Akutagawa as he gazed at the same scenery. "Blessings and misfortune are divided equally in halves? Tell that to my friends who died in the slums."

"You're the other half, Akutagawa." Kenji looked at him. "You survived, and you developed an incredible skill. Everyone passed the good half on to you. That's why..."

Kenji paused and smiled as the evening sun glowed in his eyes.

"That's why I just know you'll get your sister back. A lot of good things are waiting for you now. That's what nature's all about."

Akutagawa stared at Kenji for a few moments as if he was scrutinizing those words before eventually turning his gaze at the setting sun.

"I see," Akutagawa replied in a hushed tone. "My friends who perished gave me their half."

The ridges of the mountaintops were slowly swallowed by the violet night. Nobody said another word.

It took both of them four days to finish the rest of the rice planting. Kunikida paid them a visit on the last day to see how things were going, but when he arrived, he found them chatting while covered in mud.

"If you ever want to check whether the crops are doing well, then that's the bug you want to eat! These little guys taste great boiled if your field's healthy."

"Interesting. When I was struggling to find food, I used to dig up insects and eat them. The mountains in the untouched countryside always had far tastier larvae than any man-made forest or farmland."

"Let me treat you to some salt-grilled ones next time you're free!"

"I look forward to it."

As he watched their exchange, Kunikida muttered in blank amazement, "They're...getting along..."

Akutagawa received Kenji's stamp after they finished transplanting the rest of the rice.

"The owner's going to give us a whopping ten percent of the rice when it's ready, so I hope you're looking forward to gaining some weight," Kenji joked in the agency's hallway with a smile.

"It appears I won't need to worry about starving for quite some time," replied Akutagawa.

Kunikida happened to be passing by just then, so Akutagawa asked him how the investigation on the illegal dumping was going.

"We're on the verge of solving it," replied Kunikida. He then quietly stared at Akutagawa for a few moments and asked, "Did...you get a tan?"



“No,” replied Akutagawa.

“But I can see the outline of your shirt on your neck—”

“I didn’t get a tan,” Akutagawa answered shortly, his expression blank.

“Are you sure? Well, if you say so... At any rate, you don’t need to worry about the illegal dumping case—it’s essentially over and done with. The carrier who transported the waste confessed to everything. All that’s left is to obtain an arrest warrant for the drug company responsible.”

“That is excellent news. But what made the carrier confess to the crime so easily? Selling out your client is supposed to be taboo among career criminals.”

Kunikida’s lips curled into a faint smile.

“It’s simple. Nobody in this city is going to make Kenji angry if they know what’s good for them.”

It was Kunikida’s turn next. He had already decided what he was going to request from Akutagawa the moment he heard Ranpo explain the OK Card. It was something that he had originally envisioned over a year ago, so when everyone heard about Akutagawa having to earn the stamps, they thought: *Yep, I can already imagine what Kunikida has in mind.*

Early the next morning at six thirty in the Armed Detective Agency’s dormitory:

“Hey, new guy! It’s time to leave for work! Get up and get dressed!”

Kunikida’s bellow echoed throughout the dormitory.

“You’re already two minutes and thirty seconds behind wake-up time! You’ll be following my schedule for the next two weeks starting today! You’re going to set a precedent and put an end to our detectives’ overly lax work ethic!” shouted Kunikida while he pointed at his watch. “Now get up! You have twenty-two minutes for breakfast, eighteen to get dressed, sixteen minutes and thirty seconds to arrive at the office, and six minutes and ten seconds of preparation before you start your work! Plans only have meaning when they’re flawless! Got it? Now hurry and—”

“Up here,” came a voice from above. Akutagawa was gazing at the morning

sun from atop the roof. His gray overcoat fluttered in the brisk morning breeze. He watched unblinkingly as the warm sunlight slowly illuminated the rooftops of the buildings below, his motionless figure reminiscent of a king gazing upon his kingdom.

“You’re...already awake?”

“I’m a light sleeper,” replied Akutagawa while he continued to watch the morning break. “Therefore, I spend early mornings taking in the city like this, awaiting any hints of impending dangers or trouble that may appear along with the morning sun: the sound of a getaway car screeching off, the smell of spilled fuel oil floating through the air, overcapacity transport ships’ steam whistles...”

He paused for a moment and looked down at Kunikida standing in front of the dormitory.

“Time to head for work, you say? Let’s go.”

Akutagawa used his skill to lift his body into the air and nimbly lower himself to the surface.

“All right... Did you already finish breakfast?” asked Kunikida.

“I’m fine.”

“What? Absolutely not. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Without it, you won’t be able to jump-start your pancreas to its fullest potential, which would further inhibit your body’s ability to regulate your blood sugar during lunch and dinner. In other words, missing one meal could hinder your performance for the day. Therefore, you need an ideal breakfast for the ideal work—”

Without even blinking, Akutagawa suddenly walked past Kunikida in the middle of his lecture.

“Hey, wait! Akutagawa! Ever hear about respecting your elders?!”

The issue on Kunikida’s mind could be summarized in one sentence: The detectives at the agency lacked discipline.

The other detectives’ free-spirited work style was always a cause of anxiety for a stickler for infallible business operations like Kunikida.

The Tanizaki siblings, who were always touchy-feely whether they were in the middle of work or even meeting with a client...

Oda, who was always late because some old lady in the neighborhood stopped him for a chat...

Yosano, who always took her patients apart three or four times under the guise of treating them...

Kenji, who would suddenly disappear after saying his cow went into labor...

The great detective Ranpo, who doesn't want to solve any cases that don't interest him...

Of course, there was good reason why everyone was allowed to be so lax—hence why the president let them and why Kunikida had no right to suggest they correct their ways. Therefore, he had no choice but to acquiesce.

However...

Kunikida's favorite phrase was "Everything according to plan," and he disliked phrases such as "Eh. It'll work out." He was constantly, tirelessly yearning for the ideal, and he wasn't going to stop until he obtained perfection—which, in his mind, was something far different from the detective agency's current status quo.

"Akutagawa, I am appointing you as the agency's disciplinarian!" declared Kunikida.

There is nothing worse as an adult than being called out for lazy work by a newbie. And knowing Akutagawa's personality, Kunikida figured the boy would be able to denounce others' transgressions regardless of any hierarchical barriers at the workplace. He was the perfect person for the job. The OK Card was like a gift from god to Kunikida.

And yet...

"Listen, Akutagawa. Disciplinarians must first set an example for others. In other words, you need to stick to your work schedule and be punctual. When you arrive at the office, you must first file your paperwork from the previous day and finish all internal communications. You'll have to regularly check if

there are any new cases every day and follow your schedule on a per-minute basis. Optimally allocating your time and executing your plan is the first step to achieving your ideal—”

“I am not interested in offices or paperwork.”

“Excuse me? No, you—”

“More importantly, where is the enemy? I would function better at disposing of the agency’s enemies rather than struggling with cumbersome office work. I shall tear every last one of your foes to shreds.”

“No, listen, your work isn’t just fighting. It’s—”

“I shall tear all the paperwork to shreds as well.”

“Don’t!”

And it didn’t end there.

“Look—today you’ll be learning how to properly conduct business here. Our client has asked us to expose a child abduction ring. I’ve invited a witness—a child who was almost a victim himself—to the agency for questioning. However, the boy is only twelve years old, and the event is still fresh in his mind, so be careful with how you phrase your questions.”

“Hey, kid. Tell me what the person who tried to kidnap you looked like. *Now*. And don’t tell me you don’t remember—unless you don’t mind being thrown out the fourth-floor window.”

“Huh?! I—I—I—I—”

“Don’t threaten him, you idiot! Akutagawa, did you even listen to what I said? Do you want the agency to get sued?!”

“If you can’t remember, I’ll throw you out the fifth-floor window. If you still can’t remember, I’ll take you up to the sixth floor and the seventh floor after that.”

“He’d already be dead after you threw him out the fifth-floor window!”

“Ah. Then the third floor shall do.”

“What kind of compromise is that?”

“This is getting us nowhere. I’m just going to find every person who fits the suspect’s description and beat the truth out of them.”

“It appears I’ll have to help you develop some social skills before we even start working on scheduling...”

And it simply got worse from there.

Akutagawa ignored all business procedures. He neglected miscellaneous routine duties. To make a long story short, destruction was his go-to answer for everything. It didn’t matter whether he was talking to a victim, a client, or a criminal. He always tried to use his skill to beat answers out of them. It appeared to be more of an innate trait of his rather than something he learned from his environment or experience.

When Kunikida pointed out how accepting and tame Akutagawa had been while farming with Kenji, Akutagawa offered a calm response: He personally knew just how important food was due to where he’d grown up. Paperwork, however, doesn’t fill your stomach. He’d tried—many times, in fact—and it still left him hungry.

Only a week had passed, yet Kunikida’s plan to turn Akutagawa into a model detective was on the verge of falling apart.

“Akutagawa? Akutagawa! Where are you?!”

Kunikida came bounding through the agency’s office.

“Kunikida? Is everything okay?” asked Tanizaki while he was working at his desk.

“Akutagawa is supposed to be filing paperwork right now, and he’s nowhere to be found! He must have used his skill to remove the restraints around his wrists and ankles, then ran away...”

Kunikida’s clenched fist was trembling.

“There’s no going back now! I’ll need to report this to the president... It’s time we assign someone to surveil Akutagawa—the disciplinarian’s disciplinary monitor!”

“And then who monitors the monitor? That sounds endless...” Tanizaki

frowned. “But if you’re looking for Akutagawa, he’s right there.”

“What?! Where?”

“There. Look. Right there.”

Tanizaki pointed at the reception desk used to welcome clients when they arrived on the office floor. Nobody was there...or so Kunikida thought.

Akutagawa was hiding underneath the desk. He was camouflaged among the shadows, still with that same piercing stare.

“What...? What are you doing?”

Kunikida curiously tilted his head to the side.

“I’m hiding from Dr. Yosano,” Akutagawa replied, his expression and voice equally emotionless.

“...Pardon?”

“Apparently, Dr. Yosano said that Akutagawa needed to undergo her healing ability forty times if he wanted her to stamp his OK Card,” mentioned Tanizaki with a sympathetic expression. “Akutagawa readily agreed to undergo the treatment if that’s all it took...but Yosano grabbed a hatchet and an electric saw —”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Kunikida closed his eyes and shook his head. “I have a good idea of what happened.”

“I was able to endure it the first four times.” Akutagawa’s sharp gaze glowed within the darkness. “But after that, I... There are realms that one must never venture into. Even if one were to survive, experiencing that forty times would surely send them over the edge.”

“Not even Akutagawa is a match for her...” Kunikida sighed. “I’d run away, too, but work is still work. Did you forget our promise? We’re going to expose that child kidnapping ring this week, and we are already way behind schedule thanks to you not taking this work seriously. We won’t meet our deadline at this rate. How do y—”

“The kidnapping ringleaders are in the next room.”

“What?”

“I already captured them,” claimed Akutagawa without batting an eye. “If someone is kidnapping children for profit, then there are essentially two main ways to do so: human trafficking and ransoms. The former uses children from poor families while the latter uses children from wealthy ones. I can’t speak for the latter, but having grown up on the streets, I am painfully aware of how these criminals kidnap destitute children. Therefore, I simply followed the trail. I squeezed every scumbag I knew in the slums for information until I was able to identify the man who had recently participated in the kidnappings. I stormed the criminals’ hideout after the man told me its location, and I captured everyone present using my skill... They’ll be judged for their crimes in a court of law, so I spared their lives. I had to slice off a few toes to prevent some of them from escaping, though.”

Kunikida immediately rushed over to the reception room next door. When he entered, he found five men gagged and hog-tied on the floor. The moment they saw Kunikida, they screamed out with tears welling in their eyes.

“What the...?”

The number of suspects and their physical appearances corresponded with the information the agency had obtained during their investigation over the last week.

“*Sigh...* He really isn’t going to be able to set an example for the others, is he? I told him to follow the plan.” Kunikida scratched his head with a bitter smirk. “What kind of person cuts business plans short by an entire week?”

Oda and Akutagawa were sprinting down the culverts under the city of Yokohama.

Oda moved like the wind through the underdrain, leaping over wire mesh fences and kicking off drainpipes to jump even higher, then rolling forward upon landing to soften the impact.

He was being chased by something fabric. A blade of cloth tore through the air, destroying the ground below Oda’s feet. He leaped out of the way right before it could hit him, then grabbed onto a drainpipe on the ceiling and swung himself quickly forward like a pendulum. The incoming streams of fabric

snapped the drainpipe like a twig, but Oda had already let go by then and was landing on a different level.

“Wait!” came a beastly roar from behind.

“Nope,” Oda replied casually, not even out of breath. The pursuer—Akutagawa’s skill—was surging straight for him from behind with each attack aimed for his neck. At times, Oda leaned to the side, while at others, he used a bullet to deflect the fabric and dodge. None of the attacks were connecting; it was as if an invisible wall were protecting Oda.

“What’s wrong? You’re supposed to be practicing in case the man you’re after tries to run away. Come at me with everything you’ve got,” taunted Oda while sprinting. “Your skill is powerful, but your lack of physical strength is always going to hold you back when it comes to a battle of endurance. Ranpo’s deduction, those stamps—it’s all gonna be for nothing at this rate.”

“Ha...ha-ha...!” laughed Akutagawa while panting. “*This* is why you are my master! However...!”

Oda suddenly stopped in his tracks with a look of utter astonishment. “This is...”

Because he found himself in a stone corridor—a dead end. There was no place to run, nor was there anything to use as a barricade.

“I know the culverts underneath Yokohama like the back of my hand. I led you straight to a dead end, for not even you would be able to escape a saturation attack here if I use my skill.”

Oda looked around and scratched his head. “All right. You win.” He then pointed at Akutagawa’s feet and said, “By the way, look below you.”

“What?”

Akutagawa dubiously lifted his foot and looked down. Bullet holes were carved into the floor. There were six bullet holes right where his foot had just been that outlined the sole of his shoe. Taken aback, Akutagawa retreated a step and noticed there were bullet holes arranged in the same pattern where his other foot had been.

“I shot at the ceiling just before you came into this room. The bullets then ricocheted and landed in the ground right where you’re looking... What do you think would’ve happened if I waited another second to shoot?”

“The bullets would have pierced my skull from my blind spot...” Akutagawa scowled.

“Exactly. Still, being able to dictate where your opponent runs is impressive, so let me treat you to some udon. You’ve earned it.”

Akutagawa pondered for a few moments before asking, “Udon...? Why?”

“I just feel like udon. That’s all,” Oda answered, his expression unchanged.

Akutagawa’s piercing gaze narrowed even more as he said, “Stamp my card if you wish to reward me. Your stamp and Yosano’s are the only ones left I need.”

“What do you plan on doing about Yosano’s?”

“It won’t be a problem. I’ll...think of something tomorrow.” Akutagawa casually averted his gaze.

“Uh-huh. Well, if you want my stamp...,” began Oda. “I just remembered I had a job I’d like you to do for me. It’s simple, really. Even a kid could do it.”

Akutagawa nodded and urged, “Go on.”

“I’m going out of town on business tomorrow for three days. I want you to go check up on things at the shop while I’m gone.”

“‘The shop’?”

“It’s a restaurant,” revealed Oda. “Me and this restaurant go way back, even before I joined the agency. Unfortunately, though, I have to leave town on business on the day I promised I’d help out, so I want you to go in my place.”

Akutagawa appeared suspicious, so Oda added, “Don’t worry. It’s never that crowded.” He shrugged. “Just play with some kids, and it’ll be over before you know it.”

“Damn you, Sakunosuke Oda... You tricked me.”

Five, then six kids were taking turns jumping on Akutagawa.

“Yay!”

“Whee!”

“He’s just like a slide!”

The children squealed and shouted as they slid down Akutagawa’s back while he lay on the ground. None of the kids were any older than ten, and there were a few children around three years old who were enviously watching them from the side.

“Sorry about all this. I really appreciate the help, though,” said the restaurant’s owner with a laugh. He was standing by the doorway and wearing a yellow apron. “I was worried the kids were gonna get lonely with Oda out of town, but seems they’ll be just fine from the looks of it. Anyway, I’ve gotta get back down and run the restaurant. I’m countin’ on ya.”

“Wai—”

Akutagawa tried to call for help, but the kid sitting on his head ended up silencing him with his butt.

Akutagawa was in one of the rooms in the restaurant’s adjoining row house. He used his skill to create a tent over his body to protect himself while he pulled out his cell phone and punched in Oda’s phone number.

“*Oh. Hey, Akutagawa,*” came Oda’s flat voice on the other side of the line. “*What’s up?*”

“Don’t play dumb, you traitor,” Akutagawa hissed. ““Just play with some kids, and it’ll be over before you know it’? You clearly only wanted me to take over babysitting duty for you. More importantly...how many of them are there? Are you planning on building an army or something?”

In between his job at the detective agency, Oda would take in and foster orphans who had nowhere to go. He used to rent the second floor of the restaurant, but it was getting crowded, so he moved everyone to the tenement next door. They had become a huge family.

“I think there are fifteen altogether, but I don’t plan on making an army.”

“It was a figure of—Hmph. It doesn’t matter.” Akutagawa scowled. “At any rate, I find it hard to believe you can raise this many orphans on the agency’s

salary... How are you earning enough to take care of them?"

"That's a secret." Oda let out a faint, almost inaudible laugh. *"I left a list of tasks with the owner that I'd like for you to take care of on my behalf. I'm counting on you, Akutagawa. It's your job to look after the kids, as the oldest one there."*

"A list? There are even more—"

However, Akutagawa suddenly realized something midsentence.

"Wait... 'The oldest one there'? Are you saying I'm the same as them? Is that why you saved me at the riverside?"

"You've got this, Akutagawa."

"Why you—!"

But Akutagawa's cries proved fruitless, for Oda had already hung up.

And just like that, the three days of hell began.

The first day.

Akutagawa was given the task of creating playground equipment: monkey bars, zip lines, swings, slides, trampolines, and even some things he had never seen before. He transformed his overcoat into countless playthings—things the children could only dream of. Naturally, the kids were beside themselves with joy as they clung to, swung from, and jumped on Akutagawa's overcoat-turned-playground equipment.

"Whoaaaaaaa! Awesooome!" one of the kids shouted with glee as he dangled from the ceiling with fabric tied around his waist.

"Do it again! Do it again! Do it again!" Another child had been launched high into the air by Akutagawa's overcoat and was now shaking him for more after landing.

"Ha-ha-ha! I'm going so fast!" Several children shrieked with delight, latching onto the overcoat as it swiftly soared through the air and over the ground like a dragon.

It began at nine in the morning and continued until three in the afternoon,

only breaking for lunch. After that, the young children took a short nap before resuming playtime until dinner. There were over a dozen hyperactive kids and only one Akutagawa.

Akutagawa lay on the ground like a corpse while everyone else was eating dinner.

“Just...kill me...”

Akutagawa’s breathing came out in short gasps like a comatose patient on the verge of death. He had become one with the floor, now powerless against the pull of gravity.

“I really appreciate the hard work, kiddo. How ’bout some dinner?” asked the owner.

“No.” Akutagawa looked as if his soul had left his body. “If I try to eat now...all the food will just get stuck in my throat...and I’ll choke to death...”

Day two.

It was Parents’ Day at one of the orphans’ schools, so Akutagawa participated on behalf of the child’s guardian.

The old wooden floor was a caramel brown. One of the walls was plastered with hiragana calligraphy. The gym teacher’s shouts echoed from the field. The hallways were freshly painted white.

And standing in the back of the classroom were the students’ parents and guardians, all of whom seemed restless. Half were worried about their child acting up in class. As for the other half, however...

“Hey... Whose father is that?”

“He’s staring daggers at the teacher, that’s for sure.”

“Are we in danger here? Because he looks like a hitman if you ask me...”

The rest anxiously whispered about Akutagawa as he impassively stared ahead. Nevertheless, he did not seem to care in the least. He stood stiffly at attention while simply watching the lecture with nothing specific on his mind.

“All right. Who can read what this says?” the teacher asked the students as

she pointed at what was written on the blackboard. No student raised their hand, so she cocked her head and frowned.

“Really? No one?”

Akutagawa glanced over at one of the girls Oda had taken in. She was fidgeting in her chair and looking around anxiously. She was hesitant to raise her hand, since she was shy about answering all by herself. Akutagawa faintly clicked his tongue, and the little girl immediately began raising her hand into the air. She looked at her hand in surprise, but it didn’t stop. A piece of gray fabric was wrapped around her wrist.

“Oh, Sakura! Great. Want to give it a shot?”

“U-um... Okay... It... It s-says ‘house’...”

“That’s right! Good job.”

The guardians all oohed and aahed in admiration. Right as the little girl answered, the cloth released her wrist before crawling on the ground and returning to Akutagawa’s overcoat.

He appeared slightly pleased.

The third day.

The oldest boy asked Akutagawa to spar with him as a part of his combat training.

“I’m gonna get superstrong just like my big bro Oda. Then I’m gonna join the detective agency just like him, too! No matter what!”

The fourteen-year-old boy named Kousuke was orphaned during a struggle between rival criminal organizations known as the Dragon’s Head Conflict, until Oda took him in. Kousuke was now something like a big brother and leader to all the other kids. He also apparently helped out at the restaurant and saved up his earnings.

“I even bought a gun. A *real* one.”

Kousuke showed off his pistol from the other side of the service counter. It was a 9mm just like Oda’s.

“Did you buy that with your own money?”

“Yep.”

There were numerous smugglers at the harbor who sold anything and everything to anyone with the coin. Plenty of criminals would sell weapons to a small child if they were desperate for cash.

Akutagawa indifferently looked down at the gun and grunted. “Very well. I suppose I could help you train.”

Kousuke was slammed upside down against the fence with enough force to bend it before landing on the ground and moaning in agony.

“What’s wrong? I only tapped you.”

“Damn it!”

Kousuke staggered back to his feet as his knees trembled. Akutagawa’s fabric immediately shot forward, wrapped around Kousuke’s neck before he could run away, and slammed him back down on the ground. Kousuke tried to scream, but every last bit of air had been expelled from his lungs. He and Akutagawa were training in an empty lot near the restaurant.

“You’ll only get in Oda’s way if you cannot even defeat me... Though I suppose that won’t be a problem if your goal is dying and burdening your siblings with your funeral expenses.”

“You...!”

Kousuke shakily got back to his feet, eyes still burning with determination.

“Still not discouraged, I see. Very well. I shall allow you to hit me once. However, failing to defeat me is an admission that you will never survive as a detective.”

“I’ll...show you... Haaaaaah!!”

Kousuke charged forward. It was a suicidal attack with absolutely no means of defense...or that was at least how he wanted it to seem. Moments before colliding with Akutagawa, he suddenly changed course, rolled to Akutagawa’s side, then immediately threw a high kick with all the strength he could muster. The kick closed in on Akutagawa’s jaw, powerful enough to violently rattle his

brain against his skull, yet Kousuke's heel only grazed Akutagawa's chin.

"Spatial Break," muttered Akutagawa emotionlessly.

A giant fist-shaped piece of fabric then slammed into Kousuke's body, launching him straight back before he bounced and rolled off the ground as if he had been hit by a car.

"I despise the weak, for they can never follow their dreams. Their hopes are meaningless. You will never become Oda's successor. You will accomplish nothing and die a nobody."

Covered in dirt and cuts while on the ground, Kousuke clenched his teeth and groaned. "No! No, no, no, you're wrong! I'm gonna be just like him! I will...! I swear I will!"

Akutagawa's overcoat wiggled as it pulled out a gun. It was the 9mm pistol that Kousuke had shown off at the restaurant. Akutagawa had secretly swiped it from him when he had his guard down.

"That's..." Kousuke's face turned pale, for he just realized that his gun had been stolen.

"I despise guns as well," said Akutagawa. "People get cocky when they wave one of these around. But this is the reality of it."

Akutagawa grabbed the gun, aimed the muzzle at his own temple, and fired every last bullet in its clip.

"Wha—?!"

Each bullet appeared to ricochet off Akutagawa's ear, but not even one grazed his skin. They were bouncing off an invisible wall before dropping to the ground.

"Bullets are powerless in this world," muttered Akutagawa without batting an eye. "And yet, my friends in the slum were brutally murdered by thugs who thought they were something simply because they had guns. That's why I despise these wretched things."

Right as he threw the gun, the sharp sound of a blade swiftly cutting through the air echoed with a flash of light as the weapon was sliced into countless

fragments of metal. The black metal scraps tragically scattered before the young boy's stunned gaze.

"Kousuke, the weak have no right to decide their fate. If you ever appear before me with a gun again, I will kill you."

Akutagawa turned his back to the quietly trembling boy and promptly left.

After walking until the empty lot was out of sight, he turned the corner where Oda was waiting for him.

"I appreciate it," he said in a soft voice.

"This is the last time I help you," Akutagawa replied sullenly. "From now on, if you want to crush a child's dream, do it yourself. It should be easy for someone with your talent."

"Kousuke would idolize me even more if I did it." Oda scratched his cheek awkwardly. "Sorry for asking you to be the bad guy."

Oda's final request to Akutagawa had been to make Kousuke give up on his dream of fighting organized crime.

"The boy is a very good cook," admitted Akutagawa without making eye contact. "Being a chef suits him far more than fighting crime."

"You're saying Kousuke isn't suited for fighting?"

"That is precisely what I'm saying. He would gladly throw his life away to protect his siblings. In our line of work, those kinds of people are the first to find their way into a coffin. Only those who can cast their anger aside and act rationally end up surviving."

Akutagawa then began walking away.

"You're absolutely right," admitted Oda as he watched Akutagawa leave. "Emotions are at the very center of our existence, but they aren't the center of the world. There's *nothing* at the center of the world. So don't let your emotions control you, Akutagawa. Do not pursue the beast within you. Stand on your own two feet, rely only on yourself, and be as cold and tough as you can. You won't be able to survive in this world otherwise."

Akutagawa suddenly stopped in place.

“...Wait.” He turned his head back slightly and glared at Oda. “Don’t tell me that entire charade was to get me to say, ‘Only those who can cast their anger aside and act rationally end up surviving’? For me to temper my vengeance for the man in black?”

“Not at all. I’m not that clever.” Oda shrugged.

Akutagawa glared at him in silence for a few more moments until he eventually uttered, “I am nothing like that child.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

Akutagawa opened his mouth to object, but he didn’t say a word. Everything he wanted to say got lost in Oda’s apathetic gaze before vanishing into nothingness. He gave up on a response, then turned his back to Oda and began walking off once more.

#2

A privately managed café called Uzumaki was located on the first floor of the multipurpose building where the detective agency had an office. The interior was old-fashioned; the walls, tables, and chairs were discolored with age. The fragrance of coffee filled the air as classic jazz played in the background.

Akutagawa sat at the counter with a cup of roasted green tea in one hand while glaring at some documents. However, no matter how long he stared, the documents did not back down. It was a stack of procedural reports. He had finally gotten to the point where he couldn't ignore them any longer. They had become a powerful foe that stood in his way and had the upper hand. Sweat dripped down Akutagawa's cheeks as the paperwork beat him helpless into a corner.

There were no other customers in the café, and the owner was busy wiping coffee mugs in front of the cupboard. It was raining outside.

A café. Rain. Jazz. The smell of coffee.

Akutagawa had those four things necessary to slow the flow of time, but he whipped out his cell phone as if he couldn't bear the silence.

"It's me. Would it be possible to exempt me from filling out paperwork this year?"

"Of course not, you idiot," barked Kunikida on the other side of the line.

Akutagawa replied with a scowl, "Imagine this was a field that would yield twice much if I was to allow it to lie fallow. Wouldn't taking down twice as many fiendish criminals be better?"

"You've been using a lot of farming metaphors lately."

All of a sudden, the door to the café chimed.

It was a fateful sound—one that would change everything.

In walked a boy wearing a black overcoat drenched from the rain. Droplets of water dully shined on his nearly pure-white hair. He wore a gentle expression that seemed almost apologetic to this world, yet his overall appearance could only be described as nothingness itself. He didn't have a presence. A tiny spider on a rooftop stood out more than he did.

The boy took his coat off at the entrance, then briefly brushed off some of the water droplets before noiselessly strolling over to the counter and taking a seat next to Akutagawa. The boy walked even more silently than a cat. Akutagawa didn't turn his head, but he followed him with his eyes the entire time.

"...He's strong," muttered Akutagawa quietly.

"*What?*" replied Kunikida. Akutagawa, however, simply hung up without explaining.

"I'll have a coffee," the newcomer said to the owner before falling silent once more. Still as a statue, he didn't budge even an inch after that. Some time went by until all of a sudden he faced Akutagawa and asked, "Excuse me. I overheard your phone call a moment ago, and I was wondering if you were a detective?"

Akutagawa studied him from head to toe with a piercing gaze before responding, "Yes, I am."

"I see." The boy smiled. "To tell the truth, my boss sent me here to deliver a letter to the president of the Armed Detective Agency, but I got lost. Then all of a sudden, it started raining, so I thought I'd come in here and wait it out."

Without even blinking, Akutagawa replied, "The agency is on the fourth floor."

"Oh, it is?" The boy's face lit up. "Thank goodness."

The owner placed a coffee on the table before the boy. After getting a brief whiff of its aroma, he picked up a sugar cube off the saucer and dropped it into the mug.

One. Two. Three cubes.

Akutagawa silently counted the sugar cubes. Noticing this, the boy faintly

smirked as if he had to excuse his behavior.

“Oh, this? Um, you see...my colleagues always tell me three is too many, but I just can't help myself. Where I grew up, sugar was worth its weight in gold. Old habits die hard, right?”

Akutagawa quietly stared at the boy until eventually saying, “An orphanage?”

The boy was taken aback. “How did you know?”

“There is something unique about you. The way you're excessively focused on others' behavior... The way you keep your distance as if you expect others to alienate you... I grew up in a similar environment as well, and I've seen a lot of kids who have run away from orphanages.”

“Is that so?” The boy smiled wistfully. It was the smile of someone who dwelled on the past. “I didn't have the courage to run away. For the longest time—even now—these sorts of quirks were just second nature to me, even though I know I can have as much sugar as I want... I'll probably be like this for the rest of my life.”

Akutagawa watched the boy for some time after that until eventually picking up his mug and casually saying, “I put four cubes in this green tea.”

The boy's eyes opened wide. “Sugar cubes? In tea? ...And four at that?”

“Yes.” Akutagawa sipped his tea with an apathetic expression. “I'm the same as you. It's a habit from when sugar used to be a rare luxury for me.”

The boy stared at Akutagawa in mute amazement for a few moments until he eventually burst out laughing as if he couldn't hold it in any longer.

“Pffft! Ha-ha-ha.” His laughter instantly made him appear even younger. “So you're also used to fighting over stuff, right? Like pencils and notebooks?”

“Of course. Normal people wouldn't be able to understand... We used to get more competitive over pencils and notebooks than sugar or even meat. After all, you were the freest person in the entire world whenever you wrote something down on a sheet of paper. It was war. Children who didn't know how to write wanted pencils and paper for reasons unknown to even themselves... How about chocolate bars? Did you fight over those, too?”

“Naturally. They’re basically currency, right? For something so commonplace, there was such high demand for chocolate bars that their value never changed, which was why everyone used them as currency. Potatoes went for five chocolate bars. A day of teaching someone how to read and write netted you three chocolate bars.”

“I once managed to save up three hundred as a bodyguard and backup in street fights.”

“Three hundred?!” The boy was visibly shocked. “You must have been the richest kid in the neighborhood!”

“I ate chocolate for days on end after that until I collapsed from malnutrition.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!” laughed the young man mirthfully.

They continued to shoot the breeze for the next few minutes or so. Both boys shared small yet profound experiences that their colleagues would never be able to understand or even empathize with. The two of them could just be kids, something they seldom did around others.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been able to talk to someone like this,” the white-haired boy said with a chuckle. “I probably should just have you deliver the letter for me. By the way, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Akutagawa.”

“I’m Atsushi. Atsushi Nakajima. Could you please deliver this letter to the agency’s president for me?”

The youth named Atsushi pulled a black envelope out of his pocket. There was no address or name written on it, but it was made from the finest paper available and didn’t even make a sound when shook.

“What’s the sender’s name?” Akutagawa asked.

“I was told the president would know who sent it when he read it.”

While observing the envelope, Akutagawa commented, “It doesn’t seem to be anything dangerous, but one can never be too careful in my line of work. I hear there are chemical explosives in the shape of paper going around lately.”

“You’re free to open the envelope and see for yourself. It isn’t sealed.”

Akutagawa faintly nodded, then flipped the envelope over and took out the two sheets of paper inside. However, his mood instantly changed the moment he looked at one of them.

“...What the hell is this?” Akutagawa spoke in a deep voice, quiet and cold as ice. “Is this some kind of joke?”

It was a picture of a woman. She wore a black suit as she stood impassively before the camera. Her eyes harbored no emotion toward the photographer.

“Is something the matter?” asked Atsushi.

“This picture... Do you know this person?”

“Oh, that’s Gin,” noted Atsushi as he took a peek at the picture. “Why would the boss send the agency’s president a picture of her, though...?”

“Heh... Heh-heh-heh...” Akutagawa let out a deep-throated laugh. “An amusing taunt, I must admit. I would have been the biggest clown of the century had I given the president this envelope without looking inside.” Akutagawa shook Gin’s picture as he spoke.

“Do... Do you know her?” Atsushi asked.

After quietly staring at Atsushi’s stiff expression for a few moments, Akutagawa demanded, “Where is Gin?” Hatred spewed out of every pore of his body. “Answer me, or die.”

Seemingly unfazed, Atsushi simply observed Akutagawa and confessed, “I know where she is.” His voice was calm in every sense of the word. “But I can’t tell you.”

Akutagawa’s rage swelled.

“Tell me where she is. Now. I’ve been looking for her the past four and a half years, and I don’t plan on giving up now.”

“Oh, really? Four and a half years, huh?” The emotion in Atsushi’s voice suddenly receded until it had completely faded. “Then...”

There was the sound of something cutting through air.

Akutagawa bent backward, but a vermilion line appeared on his throat and a trickle of blood immediately ran down his neck before landing on the floor.

“...?!”

Something had sliced Akutagawa’s neck the instant Atsushi moved. However, he had no idea how he was attacked, nor did he see what sliced through his skin. If he had reacted even a split second later, his carotid artery would have been sliced open before painting the ceiling with his blood.

“That...attack...,” Akutagawa uttered while holding the cut on his neck. Atsushi was standing in his original position with lowered hips and his shoulders at an angle. He wasn’t holding any sort of blade or weapon...but a touch of blood was dripping from his fingernails. Akutagawa immediately understood what happened. It was Atsushi’s nails. He had approached Akutagawa so quickly that he looked like a blur before slashing his throat and returning to his original position.

“We have a rule in our organization,” began Atsushi as emotionlessly as before he assaulted Akutagawa. “We must immediately dispose of anyone who asks of Gin’s whereabouts no matter who they are, since she’s the boss’s personal secretary and spends every waking moment with him. Doing so would put the boss’s life in danger.”

“I see.”

Akutagawa’s overcoat began flapping in the air. It furiously wriggled as if it had a mind of its own while gradually spreading out around him.

“Your boss is a coward, but that is irrelevant. Tell me where Gin is. She’s—she’s my sister.”

“Liar,” Atsushi promptly replied. “She doesn’t have any family.”

“I’m in no mood to have a heart-to-heart to convince you.”

Akutagawa’s overcoat transformed into a spear, then immediately shot through the air. A battle to the death had begun in the cramped café. The blade of fabric was as quick as a bullet, but Atsushi simply tilted his head to the side ever so slightly, dodging the blow. Akutagawa launched another attack, but Atsushi twisted his torso and dodged again. Each blade pierced the wall behind

Atsushi, littering it with holes.

Akutagawa retracted his extended blade and tried using it to attack Atsushi from behind, but Atsushi dropped to the ground on all fours, avoiding the blade without even looking back. He then slammed his hands and feet into the ground and leaped into the air as if his entire body were a spring. After hitting the ceiling on all fours, Atsushi immediately kicked off it and launched himself toward Akutagawa. He suddenly threw his claws at an angle, but Akutagawa predicted his attack and used his leftover fabric as a slanted shield. Atsushi's claws created sparks as they scraped down the shield at the speed of lightning while tearing through the fabric before his fist smashed into the floor, leaving a crater as fissures ran about. A violent roar shook the café.

"I'm surprised you were able to block that," admitted Atsushi as he quickly leaped back. "I can't believe such a powerful skill user has gone undetected by our network for this long."

Atsushi then swiftly hopped off the wall before swinging around Akutagawa and opening the café's front door.

"The Armed Detective Agency has far exceeded my expectations... It'd be foolish of me to keep fighting right under my enemy's nose like this. I need to report to the boss...and figure out why Gin's photograph was inside that envelope as well."

"Wait...!" demanded Akutagawa, but his body didn't budge. Atsushi then slipped out the door and vanished without making a sound. Akutagawa stepped forward and tried to go after him, but that was as far as he got. He was bleeding copiously from his abdomen. The claws that cut through his fabric's defense bored a hole in his side. Unable to even walk, Akutagawa fell forward onto the cracked floor. The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was the picture of Gin lying on the floor right in front of him.

"...Gin..." Akutagawa mumbled desperately before passing out.



Someone once said, *"It's human nature to lash out with violence. But if hurting others is your natural instinct...then you are nothing more than a*

mindless beast.”

The black night. Wavering darkness. The flames of hell roared, reducing the sinner to ashes.

“You just wanted revenge? Even if it killed you? Did you not even think of what would happen to your little sister if you left her all alone in a place like this?”

Something was burning my throat. It was a scream, it was a lament—a fire that no shouting or howling could extinguish.

It was regret.

All I felt was hate. Pure hatred. Hatred for not the enemy but the world itself. But it was hatred that motivated me to kill my enemies, and it was hatred that took my sister away. How did it come to this? Who stole my sister from me?

“Come find me once you figure out what makes you so weak. We’ll have a rematch. I’ll be holding on to your sister until then.”

It didn’t make sense. I couldn’t comprehend it.

Where should I direct this burning resentment, this feeling beyond despair? Who should I curse if I do not even believe in a god?

“Do not pursue the beast within you,” another voice told me.

I didn’t understand. It didn’t make any sense, so all I could do was act.

If I could get my sister back and atone for the mistake born from my anger, then perhaps I would be given a chance...to redeem myself.

...A chance to atone for my mistake of feeling emotion.



When Akutagawa woke up, he was in the detective agency’s infirmary. He reflexively grabbed at his side...but nothing was there. His wound had completely healed without even leaving a scar. Akutagawa then began to look around the room until he locked eyes with Yosano, a hatchet in her hand.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she grumbled while placing down her hatchet and curling her fingers. “I had a lot of fun while you were unconscious.”

She then pulled out a piece of paper as if out of thin air. On the OK Card was a stamp in every square. Yosano, Oda, Kunikida, Tanizaki, Kenji, the president—everyone's stamp was on that card. Yosano handed Akutagawa the card and headed for the door.

“Come,” she instructed, the hem of her skirt fluttering as she walked. “There's something I want to show you.”

Kunikida, Tanizaki, and Kenji were already sitting in the conference room. As Yosano took a seat in one of the empty chairs, Kunikida said, “Watch this footage.”

A video started playing on the wall-mounted television. It showed a deck on a small ship somewhere out at sea. Two men were sitting while facing each other with a small table between them. One was a bald middle-aged man in a kimono while the other was a tall man in a black overcoat. Standing in the center between them was a nervous-looking individual wearing round glasses and a suit.

“This is footage from a clandestine meeting between two leaders from different organizations following a certain event four years ago,” commented Kunikida as he watched the video. “The older man is Chief Taneda of the Special Division for Unusual Powers, and the other is the underground organization Port Mafia's boss, Osamu Dazai.”

“So that's the Port Mafia's...,” Akutagawa muttered absentmindedly to himself.

The Port Mafia was considered the most wicked and powerful criminal organization in all Yokohama, but not a soul knew their boss's whereabouts, let alone his name or what he even looked like.

“The Special Division recorded this in secret with a super-telephoto lens just in case anything should happen. You would have to be a highly skilled agent in the Special Division to film the Mafia's secret meetings, but Ranpo discovered that the government had this footage stored away in one of their facilities with other top secret information.”

Akutagawa surveyed the room and asked, “Where is Ranpo?”

“He currently has other business he needs to attend to, but he told me to show you the footage.”

“Akutagawa, it was actually Oda who obtained this video,” said Tanizaki, who was seated. “Even with Ranpo’s *Super Deduction* and Oda’s extraordinary skill *Flawless*, which allows him to see into the near future, it took them three whole days to sneak into the secret facility and steal the footage. That just shows you how extremely dangerous the mission was and how hard it was to get this information.”

That was when it hit Akutagawa. He had just recently been asked to watch over the orphans for three days while Oda was out of town on business.

“Now, look here.” Kunikida pointed close to the center of the screen. “Do you know what that is?”

After squinting at the screen for a few moments, Akutagawa quizzically replied, “It looks like an ordinary wineglass to me.”

“This is the glass of destiny. For you, that is.”

“What?”

Kunikida turned back around and clasped his hands. “Are you familiar with directional laser microphones? It’s a surveillance device that uses lasers to detect and analyze sound vibrations in a distant object. In other words, it picks up on all surrounding sounds and echoes. This agent was able to use a laser on that glass and record what was being said during the secret meeting.”

Kunikida then synced the audio player in his hand to the video.

“The bureaucrats back at the Home Affairs Ministry are waiting for my report, but I feel like that’s not going to be enough. I’m sure they’d be thrilled if I brought them your head on a silver platter as a gift, though.”

The recording played in sync with the middle-aged man’s lip movements. It was Chief Taneda’s voice. And there was one other person—a tall young man in a black overcoat. He smirked faintly as he replied to Taneda:

“Oh, I hardly doubt I’m important enough for them to care. My head would stink up the place. Especially compared to the last leader of the Port Mafia, the

great Mori—my predecessor. I’m just a nobody.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. A little bird told me you gained your position as the new leader after assassinating Mori.”

“Oh my. That’s a chatty little bird you’ve got there.”

They both smiled, but their expressions were nothing more than masks to hide their true intentions. As he listened to them speak, Akutagawa suddenly slammed his hand against the table.

“...That’s him.” Akutagawa’s voice harbored the heat of lava. “There’s no way I could forget. That’s the voice of the man in black that I heard that day. This man is even the same height.”

After hearing that, Kunikida knitted his brow and let out a deep but short sigh. “That’s what I thought.”

“Where is he?” Akutagawa approached the screen. “Ranpo said he had a good idea of his whereabouts. Tell me. Where is this man? Where is Dazai?”

“Hold on.”

“Answer me!” shouted Akutagawa as he slammed his hand against the wall, causing the entire room to shake.

Kunikida, however, did not even flinch as he calmly replied, “Listen. We know where he is, but it isn’t possible to even get close to him. He’s on the top floor of the Port Mafia’s headquarters—the innermost room of an impenetrable fortress considered the most difficult place to sneak into in Yokohama. Countless enemy organizations that despise Port Mafia have tried to get inside, but none have succeeded. Army platoons, state-of-the-art tanks or armored helicopters, highly trained combat-oriented skill users—no one has ever succeeded. Do you understand what I’m saying? If you go there, you will die. So right now—”

“I don’t care,” Akutagawa insisted, cutting Kunikida off. “I fought one of Port Mafia’s skill users at the café on the first floor. He had my sister’s photograph and said she was the boss’s secretary.”

“Right.” Kunikida nodded solemnly. “The owner gave me a rough idea of what

happened.”

“Then what are you still sitting around for? That person is about to inform his boss of what happened today, and his boss—The man in black knows that I’m looking for my sister. In other words, he’s going to either further tighten his security or simply disappear... In fact, we would be lucky if that was all he did. What if he decides to kill my sister to get me off his tail? There’s no guarantee she will be alive tomorrow. Now is my only chance.”

Akutagawa then turned on his heel and headed for the door. His visage was that of a fiendish beast.

“Akutagawa, wait!” Tanizaki stood before him. “Even you wouldn’t be able to make it inside! They’d kill you before you—”

“Move!”

Akutagawa shoved Tanizaki out of the way before he could grab Akutagawa’s arm. A blade of fabric grazed Tanizaki’s flesh.

“Ow!”

Tanizaki fell backward, then tightly applied pressure to his hand. On the back of his hand was a fine cut left by Akutagawa’s skill. He winced in pain and looked up at Akutagawa. When Akutagawa saw his face, he scowled faintly for a brief moment, then immediately averted his gaze and began heading toward the exit once more.

“Akutagawa!”



It was twilight in Yokohama—the fleeting fiery moment where the indigo and black swap places in the sky. In that moment, all hell broke loose in the Port Mafia headquarters.

Countless armed Mafia soldiers rushed to the lobby at the entrance of the building with guns, grenades, and radios. However, not a single one of them could comprehend exactly what was going on. This was Akutagawa’s plan to sneak inside and make it to the top floor of the impregnable fortress, but nothing about it seemed sneaky at all. Akutagawa simply strode in through the

main entrance.

“Shoot! Kill him!”

Numerous shouts rang out as a volley of bullets flew through the air...all because of one unarmed man walking casually through the lobby. Nevertheless, not a single bullet even touched Akutagawa. Each one froze right before hitting him and then fell to the floor.

“Show yourself.” Akutagawa looked ahead sharply with a fire burning in his eyes. “Man in black—leader of Port Mafia—show yourself. Where are you?!”

No one could comprehend what was happening, not even the moment their own head was sliced off.

“Eek!”

“Do not retreat! Shoot him! We can’t let hi—”

Fresh blood scattered like flower petals in the hallway, on the walls, and on the ceiling. Akutagawa’s rage had taken shape in the form of carnage, followed by a cacophony of shrieking and death.

“Where is he? Where is your boss?” he demanded furiously. “Bring him to me. Now!”

The gray fabric had become the claws of a demon, destroying the lobby. Pillars were sliced in half as decorations fell and shattered on the ground. All that was left were spent cases and bullets scattered about the severed guns and mountain of ravaged corpses.

Akutagawa did not even glance at the bodies he created or the destruction he caused. His eyes only looked forward. He climbed up the stairs and walked down the hallway. Before long, the alarm sounded as bulletproof and fireproof shutters sealed off each passageway, but even then, Akutagawa could not stop. His fabric blade hollowed the shutters, allowing him to calmly pass through.

His expression never changed, whether it be a gun or shutter that got in his way. He hardly showed any interest, even when he pierced his foe with his blade and splattered their blood onto the ceiling. The only time he paid attention to his enemies was when he sliced their heads off. Their pained cries

and moans were nothing more than background noise. There was no longer anything human about him. He was the bringer of death—a demon of the underworld focused on only one thing: the despicable man on the top floor who had robbed him of his sister.

Akutagawa climbed the stairs until he reached the third floor.

Judging by its appearance, the Mafia's headquarters, the tallest building in Yokohama, was around forty stories tall, and Akutagawa was only on the third floor. While that was still under 10 percent of building, just a select few had ever made it this far during the building's long history. Akutagawa walked down the passageway until he came to a sudden stop, where a peculiar shadowy figure stood before him.

It was a petite girl wearing a kimono with black hair and calm azure eyes. Her childlike presence was wholly unsuited for this setting. Most peculiar, though, was the shadowy figure behind her. It was floating in the air; its feet weren't touching the ground. In fact, its feet were nowhere in sight. The figure wore a smooth, white mask that hid its face. Its long hair fluttered back and forth despite the lack of any wind, and in its hand was a sheathed sword without a handguard. It was clearly not human.

"A skill... Hmph," muttered Akutagawa.

"My name is Kyouka," the girl said softly. "I'm an assassin with the Port Mafia."

She then took a flip phone out of her pocket and placed it to her ear.

"Move." Akutagawa's voice was rigid and as sharp as steel. "Don't think I'll go easy on you simply because you're a woman. I shall kill all those who stand in my way to the top floor."

"That's fine." There was even less emotion in her voice than Akutagawa's. "If I let you pass, you'll eventually have to fight *him*. So I must silence you before you can cause him any harm. You will become silence itself."

Kyouka immediately pressed a button on her cell phone and ordered:

"Demon Snow, kill this man."

The personified skill behind her unsheathed its sword—a silver katana as long as Kyouka’s entire body.

“So this is the first hurdle? Hmph,” replied Akutagawa without blinking an eye. “Very well. Come.”

The silver blade and the gray fabric blade clashed in a burst of light.



“Dazai, we have an intruder,” said Atsushi after stepping into the boss’s office.

“It would appear so,” answered the boss, Dazai, as he gazed out the window in his black overcoat. Atsushi took notice of the window as well. It was electrochromic glass that could tint until it was a black wall with the press of a button. However, it had not even been used once in the past four years. And yet, right now, it was a clear gateway to the vast blue sky and city below.

“The intruder has already broken through levels one and two,” reported Atsushi after returning his gaze to Dazai. “He is highly skilled. He’s already defeated all our guards.”

“You know him, don’t you?” asked Dazai as he turned his back to Atsushi and stared out the window.

“I do,” Atsushi replied with a nod. “I checked the cameras in the security room and saw him. His name is Akutagawa, a skill user I happened to run into at the café.”

“I see,” Dazai responded coolly. “The time has finally come.”

There was neither surprise nor bewilderment in Dazai’s voice. Instead, it sounded as if he was making sure everything was going according to plan.

“Dazai...may I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.” He still didn’t look at Atsushi.

“Is the intruder really Gin’s brother?”

Dazai remained silent for a few moments.

“Yes,” he replied icily.

Atsushi furrowed his brow and showed a hint of hesitation. “So does that mean...you lured him here?”

Dazai didn’t say anything. He simply stared at Atsushi out of the corner of his eye.

“I handed him the letter you gave me at the café, and he fell into a rage the moment he saw Gin’s picture. He showed up here not long after that.”

Dazai listened without moving a muscle.

“Did you mention in that letter that Gin was here?” Atsushi calmly asked. “What I’m trying to say is, did you purposely have that skill user attack our headquarters?”

Dazai turned around, then walked over until he was standing in front of Atsushi without changing his expression. He spoke in a deep, raspy voice that would tear the soul apart of all who heard it:

“What if I did?”

Atsushi stopped breathing. It was if all the air in the room had disappeared.

“Imagine that the rain caused a flood and wiped out an entire village or that lightning struck a tree and caused a major forest fire. Imagine the slightest earthquake triggered a tsunami and changed the shoreline. *That* is precisely what you’re witnessing, Atsushi.”

There was even a hint of kindness in Dazai’s hoarse voice.

“This is a convulsive natural phenomenon created by the massive underground organization the Port Mafia. It isn’t something that a single soldier could stop, let alone even understand. This is a powerful vortex current. Why try to understand a flood’s true meaning?”

Atsushi looked at Dazai. He then saw an illusion: a torrent of schemes produced from a single point in Dazai’s brain that was swallowing this room, the buildings outside, the city—everything.

“So everything was all part of some plan of yours?”

But Dazai didn't respond.

"Does this have to do with the phase two and phase three thing you mentioned a while back?"

Dazai still didn't respond, but Atsushi saw something far more meaningful in his distant gaze than some eloquent speech could ever have. He immediately straightened up and vowed, "Very well. As captain of the Port Mafia's commando unit, I promise to return this building to its usual peace and tedium."

Atsushi then turned on his heel and headed for the exit.

"If you'll excuse me."

Dazai quietly watched as Atsushi strode out the door. He then faced the empty room and whispered to himself:

"Yes. This is a natural phenomenon."

There was a slight ring of prolonged exhaustion in his voice.

"Nobody can stop it...not even I. The only thing I can do is love—love the fact that this world is *one huge lie*."



The fabric blade and silver katana violently collided, creating a wall of light in the air. The blades stretching from Akutagawa's overcoat assaulted Kyouka like a shower of bullets. Demon Snow silently swung its sword at the speed of sound, deflecting each attack, but Akutagawa's overcoat was never going to run out of ammo. Even with Demon Snow's superhuman speed, there were far too many blades for Kyouka's skill to ever get a chance to counterattack.

"What's wrong, Port Mafia assassin?" Akutagawa calmly taunted as he covered his mouth. "Were you not going to silence me? Your blade will never reach me if you keep on defending like that."

Kyouka quietly watched as the torrent of fabric blades filled the hallway. Her eyes harbored a darkness within.

"You're right," she replied, expression unchanging. "But this is all I have. I am

a flower born from darkness. Killing is all I know. That's why I will kill you no matter what it takes."

She sprinted forward.

"What?!"

Pulling a dagger out of her pocket, she dashed forward headfirst, even passing Demon Snow's range of defense. Kyouka was met with a barrage of cloth blades, but she deflected each one with her dagger, sending silver streams of light shooting through the air. Nevertheless, Akutagawa's skill could cut through metal and even space itself. There was no way a physical object such as her dagger could compete. Each hit chipped away at its blade before reducing it to mere ash.

"What's wrong? Surely this is not all you've got."

"I admit you're strong, but...*he* is far stronger. I should know, after all. He was the one sent to kill me when I tried to escape the Mafia."

"What?" Akutagawa's eyes narrowed in rage. "Hmph. Then allow me to end this charade so I can move on to the main performance."

His overcoat's blades began twisting together until they formed a large spear and shot forward. And yet, there wasn't even a ripple of change in Kyouka's expression. The instant Akutagawa acknowledged the quiet darkness deep within her gaze, he instinctively threw his head back, and Demon Snow's silver blade immediately thrust right past where his head had just been.

"...?!"

Demon Snow had blended into the wall next to Akutagawa and thrust its sword out in a surprise attack, cutting a few hairs off the top of his head and faintly slicing open the bridge of his nose. Kyouka had used herself as a decoy while Demon Snow slipped behind the wall. Demon Snow would not miss its chance to strike the moment Akutagawa lost his balance, so it kept close enough to strike with its katana. Its barrage of sword thrusts was far too dense for any human to slip by and escape. Akutagawa didn't even have a moment to cut through space itself and defend. He was managing to deflect the blows with Rashomon's fabric, but Demon Snow was simply too close.

“Tsk!”

Akutagawa thought back to Oda’s advice:

“Your skill is powerful, but your lack of physical strength is always going to hold you back when it comes to a battle of endurance.”

“Then I’ll just have to make this a battle of skills once more...!”

Akutagawa pierced the floor with his overcoat while using his leftover fabric to cover himself, then immediately hurled his body in the opposite direction of Demon Snow to create some distance between them. Demon Snow’s whirlwind attacks tore into the walls, floor, and ceiling as Akutagawa spun down the hallway until landing at one of its ends. Without a moment of hesitation, he promptly turned his overcoat back into blades and took a defensive position. Akutagawa had the greatest advantage when he was at an intermediate range from his opponent, since his physical capabilities wouldn’t hinder him in any way. The scales had finally tipped back in his favor.

...Or so he thought.

“I won’t let you hurt her.”

A fist slammed into Akutagawa’s face, launching him through the air like a rag doll. A pair of claws appeared before him. Akutagawa flew down the hall as his body helplessly ricocheted off the walls and floor.

“Are you okay, Kyouka?” Standing there was Port Mafia’s White Reaper... Atsushi Nakajima. “I came to save you.”

“Damn...you...,” grunted Akutagawa as he sat up at the other end of the hallway. He panted, trying to catch his breath in between coughs. Atsushi, wearing his black combat overcoat and massive collar used to control his skill, cast an unfeeling glance at Akutagawa.

“He can still stand after that...? I thought that’d break his spine,” Atsushi remarked with a slight frown. “Oh—he must’ve used his skill to cover his body with his overcoat and cushion the blow the moment I punched him. That’s not some sort of technique or a thing you learn through training. It’s more animalistic, like the instincts of a beast... This guy’s strong.”

Atsushi quietly stood in the hallway without even the slightest opening. All he did was stand there, yet the air around him was chilling and tense. Kyouka silently walked over to his side.

“I felt it in my gut,” she explained while touching Atsushi’s hand. “I felt that if I didn’t defeat him, you would be his next opponent, and if that happened...it would be a battle to the death with only one left standing. I’m sorry...”

“It’s okay, Kyouka.” Atsushi gently held her hand. “I’m not going to die. I’m here for you. I’ll never again leave you to drown in the dark alone.”

Kyouka’s pale, delicate fingers slightly tightened around Atsushi’s hand as if she were grasping on to her last lifeline amid an endless abyss.

“I’m not afraid of the dark...,” she began softly. “Not as long as I’m with you.”

Akutagawa squinted as he observed them. He was having a hard time against one of the Mafia’s skill users, but now it was two versus one, and to make matters worse, he was in their territory. Nevertheless, his voice showed no signs of dismay.

“Two bloodthirsty killers with hearts of gold, drawn to each other through a criminal organization,” scoffed Akutagawa with a subtle laugh. “How touching. However, I looked into you both on my way here. ‘Port Mafia’s White Reaper...’ ‘The Thirty-Five-Man Killer...’ Such detestable titles. No matter how long you hold the other’s bloodstained hand, you will never be able to share each other’s warmth.”

“You’re probably right,” replied Atsushi, his eyes never wavering. “But that means you and Gin will never be able to share each other’s warmth, either.”

Akutagawa’s hair stood on end.

“Damn you...!”

His canines audibly gnashed together as the fabric twisted around him like a pit of giant snakes.

“If Gin’s hands are stained with blood, it’s only because you bastards kidnapped her...!”

Akutagawa’s overcoat gradually amassed into the head of a wolf. The beast

violently roared as Atsushi simply watched in silence.

“You can’t beat me. I have Kyouka, but you’re all alone. Nobody’s going to help you. You lost because you chose solitude,” Atsushi explained. “...Kyouka.”

After he called out to Kyouka in a monotone voice, she nodded back softly and brought her cell phone to her ear.

“Demon Snow, kill the enemy and protect us,” she quietly ordered into the phone.

However...

“...?”

Demon Snow wasn’t getting into stance with its weapon. It wouldn’t even move. It simply floated behind Kyouka and flickered as if it was not of this world.

“Demon Snow?”

Kyouka looked at Demon Snow, then down at her phone. The screen was black—its battery had run out.

“What was that about ‘nobody’s going to help’?” came a voice from out of nowhere. “Because he has plenty of help—and from the most powerful organization of skill users in Yokohama, to boot.”

All of a sudden, an invisible hand swiped Kyouka’s phone away, and a gentle snow began falling upon the corridor seemingly out of thin air.

“Akutagawa! Break through the floor and run! We’re getting out of here!”

A shadowy figure suddenly appeared behind Kyouka, but the moment she realized it, Akutagawa’s wolf roared as it tore through the floor. Countless flashes of light violently clashed in the hallway.



The Mafia headquarters began to shake, activating the emergency devices and setting off the alarm that the building was in danger of collapsing. The hallway’s foundation began collapsing. Furniture was destroyed, and countless cracks ran down the walls. Taken aback by the destruction and alarm, the

remaining Mafia soldiers grabbed their guns with one hand and their radios with the other as they darted through the building.

In the midst of the chaos, Akutagawa and Tanizaki slowly walked to the end of the hallway, hidden behind Tanizaki's skill, then slipped inside the janitor's closet. After making sure there weren't any security cameras, Tanizaki locked the door and sat down on the floor. He then looked up at Akutagawa and asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Leaning against the wall, Akutagawa covered his mouth and lightly coughed. "Minor injuries... Just like this assassin's as well."

He looked down at his feet where Kyouka lay unconscious, restrained by his skill's fabric. Her long eyelashes hung over her gently shut eyes. Akutagawa had grabbed her with his skill and took her with him.

"Why did you bring her?" Tanizaki asked.

But Akutagawa did not answer. He simply gazed at Kyouka, then faced Tanizaki and asked a question of his own: "Where is her cell phone?"

"Right here." Tanizaki slipped it out of his sleeve and showed him. "Ranpo told me about the Port Mafia's assassin Kyouka Izumi. He said that her skill *Demon Snow* only obeys her orders when she speaks to it through this phone."

"I've heard similar rumors as well," Akutagawa said calmly. "Which means she could be of use to us in more ways than one."

"How so?"

"First, I need you to tell me something." Akutagawa lightly coughed and looked at him. "Why did you come, Tanizaki? This battle is my private affair. I alone made the decision to come here. There is no reason for the agency to help, much less risk your life to sneak into Port Mafia's headquarters to save me. What is this, sympathy for a fool who lost his sister?"

"No. I came because I'm a *detective*." Tanizaki smiled awkwardly. "We have a lot in common, but you're not a detective. And a detective wouldn't look the other way when someone was risking their life to save their sister from being killed."

Akutagawa's eyes narrowed. "'Killed'?"

"This letter." Tanizaki pulled a letter out of his pocket. "It's the letter you received at the café. It's from the Port Mafia's boss, and it gives the date and time your sister Gin is going to be executed."

"What?!"

Akutagawa snatched the letter right out of his hand and began carefully looking it over.

"It says the execution is today at sundown. There isn't even an hour left to spare," said Tanizaki with a harsh stare. "After the president read the letter, he put all our current work on hold and ordered us to assist you. The others are coming up with a plan as we speak. However..."

Tanizaki's expression suddenly turned grim as he continued, "We barely even have an hour left, which limits what we can do. We still don't even know why the Port Mafia's boss sent the agency a notice of your sister's execution."

"He's taunting me." Akutagawa coldly crushed the letter in his hand. "That bastard is trying to provoke me. 'Come to the top floor before time is up. You must sacrifice yourself if you wish to save your sister.'"

"So it's a trap, huh?" Tanizaki looked deadly serious. "What are you gonna do?"

"Naturally, I'm going to play his game. I'll break through his traps, dispose of my enemies, and defeat the man in black on the top floor."

"But..." Tanizaki wore a sour expression as he stared at him. "The Mafia's most powerful skill users are going to stand in your way. They might be as powerful as the ones you just fought or even stronger. I can use my skill to make you seem invisible, but there's nothing I can do about the shutters on each floor. You could drill a hole through them with your skill, but that would set the alarm off and give away your location. What should we—?"

A voice suddenly cut Tanizaki off from the other side of the door: "You don't need to do anything...because your lives end here."

The door immediately exploded, sending pieces of the wall pelting into the

room. Countless shadowy figures stood on the other side of the broken door.

“I can’t believe you chose to hide in a closet. You do know you’re being pursued, right?” said a young voice.

“What?! B-but how did you...?”

Tanizaki stared at the door, his mouth agape. Standing there were over a dozen armed Mafia soldiers, and an innocent-looking youth with short, white hair was in the center.

“Detective, you may be able to hide your bodies with that skill, but it appears you can’t hide your smell,” intoned Atsushi Nakajima. “I used my tiger’s sense of smell to find you. Finding wounded prey is what carnivores are good at, after all.”

Several guns were promptly aimed at Akutagawa and Tanizaki. The situation instantly grew increasingly dire.

“Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh...”

A laugh unbecoming the tense atmosphere echoed.

“A carnivore? Do you know what a carnivore’s weakness is, Tiger? It’s that they’re not used to being hunted.” Akutagawa’s lips curled into a blood-chilling sneer as black flames burned in his eyes. “Never would they expect the prey to be *waiting* for them in the hunting ground.”

“‘Waiting’?” Atsushi knitted his brow.

“Observe.”

Akutagawa placed a cell phone to his ear. It was Kyouka’s phone that Tanizaki had swiped from her.

“Demon Snow, *kill your master Kyouka one hour from now.*”

“What?!”

Atsushi was taken aback and tried to leap forward, but Akutagawa kept him at bay with his fabric blades while he continued giving orders into the phone:

“You are only to stop if my voice gives you the order, and do not respond to anyone else’s voice over the next hour.”

Demon Snow appeared, then floated by Akutagawa's side with its sword drawn like a loyal servant. Atsushi was the first to realize what happened.

"Damn it...!"

His eyes opened wide as he glared at Akutagawa, who looked back with an air of nonchalance.

"Now, Tiger, do you understand the situation you are in? Take me to the top floor."

"Tsk...!"

Akutagawa took a step forward, and the Mafia soldiers turned their guns on him in alarm.

"Men! Lower your guns!" roared Atsushi, his anger shaking the walls. The soldiers shifted their gaze in bewilderment, so he shouted once more. "I said lower your weapons! Now! Do you not get it? Kyouka's Demon Snow only follows orders from the voice that speaks into her phone! No matter what!"

"Exactly," said Akutagawa. "And the demon is going to kill her one hour from now, so you must do as I say if you wish to save her life. In other words..."

"You're...taking her hostage...!"

"Precisely. So what's it going to be, Tiger? Will you sacrifice the girl and resort to violence and domination like you mafiosi always do?"

Atsushi didn't respond. He lowered his gaze and placed his head in his hands.

"Don't...hurt her..."

His voice was trembling with anger.

...No, it wasn't anger.

"What the...?" muttered Tanizaki. "Something's not right."

Atsushi began to squeeze his head with both hands until his knuckles turned white and his fingernails dug into his skin.

"No... I have to protect her... I must... 'Those who fail to protect others do not deserve to live...' 'Those who fail to...'"

Both Tanizaki and Akutagawa, and even the Mafia soldiers, were closely observing Atsushi. His voice wasn't trembling with rage. Every muscle in his body wasn't tense because he was ready to fight.

This was fear.

"Okay. I'll do as you say. I'll take you to the top floor...so don't hurt Kyouka. You have to let her go," demanded Atsushi with terror in his eyes. His teeth chattered as cold sweat dripped down his face.

After staring at him expressionlessly for a few moments, Akutagawa replied, "Very well. You have my word."

"Everyone, lower your weapons. This is an order. I'll kill anyone who disobeys," Atsushi commanded his men before he began walking into the hall. "This way."



The city below the boss's office glowed in the evening sun. Dazai sat alone at his desk with his arms crossed, his smirk so subtle that it was almost nonexistent. There was a faint darkness in his eyes as he gazed at the space between this world and the next.



“It’s finally time to start phase four,” Dazai muttered hoarsely as he stood from his desk. “Let’s do this.”

His light footsteps echoed as he crossed the room before opening a door and vanishing from his office.



Akutagawa and Atsushi traversed the building together. It was a bizarre spectacle. The Mafia guards drew their guns on them—once. But the guards were unable to do it a second time. Nobody had the courage. After all, a silent death was everywhere the Port Mafia’s White Reaper walked. He didn’t even order them to lower their weapons, nor did he instruct anyone to not harm the intruder. Atsushi was simply present, quietly walking through the premises. However, every seasoned Mafia soldier, each of whom lived in a world of only violence and domination, instinctively understood: Anyone who even thought of attacking Atsushi or the intruder would be killed before they could pull the trigger.

“The Port Mafia’s White Reaper” wasn’t a name given to Atsushi by his enemies. It was given to him by his Mafia colleagues.

The shadowy beast from hell who was prisoner to an emotion he couldn’t identify.

The one who spread white death wherever he went.

Once his switch was flipped, he would bring death to anyone in his way, be they friend or foe. He was a god of a world beyond any and all comprehension—the White Reaper.

“I’m gonna use this stairwell to go back down to the first floor,” said Tanizaki, who had remained invisible until Akutagawa and Atsushi reached the emergency staircase. After readjusting Kyouka over his shoulder to carry her more easily, he earnestly advised, “Be careful, Akutagawa.”

“I will,” Akutagawa said with a nod. “You can release the girl once I give you the signal. Until then, remain hidden so nobody can find you.”

“Got it.”

Atsushi stared at Tanizaki with a stonelike expression, but the White Reaper didn't utter a single word. As he walked down the staircase, Tanizaki looked back once more.

"Akutagawa," he called.

"What is it?"

"Earlier, I said the difference between us was that I'm a detective and you're not." Tanizaki hesitantly glanced up at Akutagawa. "But that's not quite right. You're a detective, too, now. And if you find yourself confronted with a difficult decision on the top floor, I want you to remember that."

After staring at Tanizaki for a few moments, Akutagawa replied, "Why did you decide to tell me that all of a sudden?"

"Because a hero saves his sister and returns safely with her. That's why." Tanizaki briefly smirked before promptly putting on a serious expression. "That was something I realized soon after joining the agency, and I can't tell you how much it's saved me."

Akutagawa stared hard at Tanizaki as if he were searching for the truth, which was hidden away somewhere in his expression.

"Listen, the test doesn't matter. The moment you believe you're a detective is the moment you become one. That conviction will give you the power you need. All you have to do is believe."

Akutagawa observed Tanizaki as if he were trying to grasp the true meaning of what he was saying, but he eventually nodded in acknowledgment.

"Then I will take your word for it. Be careful, Tanizaki."

"You too, Akutagawa."

Tanizaki began walking down the stairs with the young woman on his shoulders until they eventually vanished into thin air like melting snow.

Akutagawa and Atsushi pressed forward after parting ways with Tanizaki. Once they arrived on the tenth floor, there were no guards in sight. There wasn't even a sound. The order not to approach the intruder had reached everyone in the Mafia. As if they were walking through an abandoned

cemetery, only Akutagawa's and Atsushi's footsteps echoed among the silence.

"How high up are you allowed to go?" asked Akutagawa.

Atsushi turned around. He looked like he was trying to keep his emotions in check. Then he replied, "The top floor."

"It appears I chose the right man to threaten," taunted Akutagawa with a subtle nod. "Seems you've been in this organization longer than I imagined, seeing as you can shut up all those suited guards with a simple stare. How many years have you been in the Mafia?"

Atsushi didn't respond. Instead, he quietly glared at Akutagawa.

"You don't have to answer that," said Akutagawa with a chilling stare. "But do not forget that I could make one phone call and have that girl immediately killed if I feel like it."

"Don't...!" pleaded Atsushi with fear in his eyes as he swiftly turned around again. "Okay, okay... Four and a half years ago. I joined the Mafia four and a half years ago."

"Four and a half years ago...?" Akutagawa narrowed his eyes. "What made you join?"

"Someone asked me to after I got kicked out of the orphanage and was roaming the countryside," admitted Atsushi while he stared off into space. "He said he would give me what I wanted if I joined the Mafia."

"This man who asked you to join... Was it the current Port Mafia boss Dazai?"

"That's right." Atsushi nodded. "How did you know?"

"I figured as much," said Akutagawa after pondering for a few moments. "That man appeared before me around the same time four and a half years ago... He ended up choosing you over me to be his new subordinate, though."

"You? In the Mafia?" Atsushi glanced at Akutagawa. "That's hard to imagine."

"I agree. I would never join the Mafia," declared Akutagawa. "Criminals working for underground organizations make me sick. My friends were killed by —"

Akutagawa suddenly shut his mouth, leaving the hint of his last few words to linger in the air. The two walked in silence for the next few minutes, but by the time they reached the thirtieth floor, Atsushi spoke up again.

“Maybe things would’ve been different...,” murmured Atsushi in a hushed tone, “...if Dazai ended up choosing you over me. But that didn’t happen. Everything he imagines comes to fruition. That’s why you won’t be able to save your sister.”

“What?”

Akutagawa’s expression suddenly changed.

“It’s inevitable. Don’t you get it? Your colleague from the agency said, ‘A hero saves his sister and returns safely with her.’ And maybe he’s right. But *you’ll* never be a hero—because you will never be a good person. It’s clear as day.”

Akutagawa immediately grabbed Atsushi by the collar and slammed him against the wall.

“Take that back,” growled Akutagawa like a wild beast as Atsushi’s choker creaked.

“Taking back what I said isn’t going to change anything,” Atsushi replied with a curiously calm voice. “In my line of work, you start learning how to distinguish who’s good and who’s evil, whether you want to or not. A man who took a girl hostage to threaten someone and only cares about what benefits him... A man who doesn’t even realize his mission has transformed into nothing more than an appetite for destruction... That’s you. Ever since you’ve arrived, you’ve demanded to see our boss and to be taken to the top floor, but not once have you even asked anyone to bring you your sister—and yet, that’s the one thing you should’ve said the most. Your goal has become satisfying your appetite. That’s just the kind of guy you are, and that’s why you’ll never be able to save your sister.”

Akutagawa’s overcoat swelled, then pinned Atsushi’s entire body against the wall as Akutagawa punched him square in the face.

“You’re wrong!”

He punched Atsushi again and again. Atsushi’s lip split open, and blood

splattered against the wall. Akutagawa's overcoat curled into a giant spear behind him, pointing at Atsushi like a scorpion tail.

"Die...!"

"Ryuunosuke, stop."

A tranquil, dignified voice echoed throughout the room. Akutagawa's fist froze in the air while he looked in the direction of the voice as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Standing there was a woman in a dark suit. She had long, black hair tied in a ponytail that dangled past her neck. She was quiet—so quiet that she hardly had much of a presence. She was more like a painting that came to life than a living human being.

"Gin," muttered Akutagawa with disbelief.

"Why did you come, Ryuunosuke?"

Her footsteps didn't make a sound as she approached him.

"The Mafia will hunt us down for the rest of our lives if you save me."

"I don't care," replied Akutagawa. "I will save you no matter who gets in my way or what the future may bring. I made a vow to myself."

"Yeah...", uttered Gin with a hint of sorrow on her face. "That's just the kind of person you are."

Gin stopped directly in front of Akutagawa. He threw his arms open, and she immediately jumped into them.

"It's been so long," Akutagawa said as he closed his eyes while embracing her. "But I've finally gotten you back...after losing you four and a half years ago. It was all my fault."

"You haven't gotten me back," Gin whispered. "You still haven't gotten anything back."

The next moment, Akutagawa's face twisted in agony. He shoved Gin, who didn't even attempt to move, and she leaped back like a small animal, creating some distance between them.

Akutagawa squeezed his side. Sticking out of it was a dagger with a thin, silver

blade that shone like a shooting star.

“Gin...,” muttered Akutagawa, his countenance stricken with pain. “Why...?”

Gin stood quietly as she stared at her brother’s face.

“The boss was right,” she grumbled while shaking her head. Her black ponytail fluttered, peculiarly amplified as it brushed against her shoulders. “You were about to kill Atsushi...even though you needed him to save me.”

“No, I...”

Akutagawa’s clothes began drowning in blood that continued oozing out of his wound.

“You don’t care about me, Ryuunosuke.” Gin lowered her gaze with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “You don’t care about anyone but yourself.”

“You’re wrong... I wanted...to save—”

“I’m not wrong. Because you were no different that day, either.” Gin’s penetrating voice cut Akutagawa off. “You became a prisoner of anger and vengeance that day. You disappeared into the forest to kill those men. But why? Why did you leave me behind when I was injured?”

Her eyes were judging him—accusing him. Gin’s gaze was cold, sharp, and relentless.

“Because...”

“If you really wanted vengeance—if you really wanted to avenge your friends—you would’ve come up with a plan before attacking. You would’ve stood by until your wounds healed, researched your enemy, and patiently waited for your chance. But you didn’t do that. You left me behind when I was injured and rushed right into battle without so much as a plan. It was like you were enjoying the flames of revenge.”

“No... Gin... I...,” Akutagawa sputtered.

“If I’m wrong, then prove it. Convince me. Prove to me that you had some sort of grand scheme that day. Prove to me that you didn’t just want to destroy the world you despised like some wild beast.” Gin’s eyes faintly narrowed. “Please. Say something.”

“I...” Akutagawa began to speak. He had the perfect explanation. “I...”

He thought he had the perfect explanation.

“I...”

The perfect explanation was somewhere. He just needed five, no, ten seconds, and he would be able to convince her. But even after thirty seconds went by, Akutagawa remained frozen, staring at the floor. Not a single word came out of his opened mouth. Gin lowered her gaze in despair and shook her head.

“The boss said you’d only use me as an excuse again if I returned...” Gin turned her back to Akutagawa. “An excuse to destroy everything around you. I feel the same way. That’s why I can’t be with you anymore.”

She then looked away from Akutagawa and began walking off.

“No! Gin, wait! The boss plans on killing you! You mustn’t go back!”

Gin suddenly halted. “I know,” she muttered. “I pleaded with him to sacrifice my life to spare yours. That’s the only way you can survive. Farewell, Ryuunosuke.”

Gin dashed off.

“Stop! Gin, wait!”

Akutagawa began to chase after her while holding his side, but Gin was as swift as a small animal. Not even a few seconds went by before he lost sight of her.

“Why? I only came here to save you! That’s the only reason! Really, it is!”

He sprinted after his little sister.

After a few moments went by, Atsushi began to chase after them as well, but he suddenly stopped. He was getting a call from the boss on his handheld transceiver.

“Don’t go after them,” ordered Dazai. “I already know what happened. Your job is to stall him.”

“Boss—Dazai.” Atsushi bent an ear to his own transceiver. “Are you watching

us on the monitors in the security office?”

“No. I’m somewhere else, but I know what’s going on. I know that you betrayed us and were helping the enemy to save Kyouka as well.”

“‘Betrayed’?! No, I—”

“I know. That’s why I’ll tell you what we’re going to do.” Dazai seemed both serious and amused at the same time. “I knew about Kyouka’s weakness long before this happened. I understood that the enemy could use Demon Snow as a weapon, so I installed a device that records everything said into the phone.”

“Wait...” Atsushi knitted his brow. “Then that means—”

“I can edit the audio and change Demon Snow’s orders.”



After leaving the Mafia headquarters, Tanizaki headed over to the detective agency’s truck parked nearby and hid in the truck bed.

“Hmm... Only thirty minutes until sundown,” he anxiously muttered while checking his watch. “I really hope Akutagawa’s doing okay...”

All of a sudden, Kyouka’s cell phone rang until it randomly answered itself, and a voice started to come out of it.

“Demon...Snow.”

The audio was full of static and the voice seemed somewhat synthesized, but it was undoubtedly Akutagawa speaking.

“Stop... Do not...kill your master Kyouka.”

“What the...?!”

Tanizaki grabbed the phone in a fluster, but it wouldn’t turn on no matter what button he pressed. Someone had turned it off remotely. Hovering over Kyouka’s unconscious body, Demon Snow gently nodded before disappearing.



Inside the Mafia headquarters, Atsushi held his handheld transceiver in

disbelief.

“I took sound bites of Akutagawa’s voice when he gave the order and spliced them together to make a different order, then played it through Kyouka’s cell phone.” Dazai was the epitome of calm. “After that, I remotely cut the phone off, so they couldn’t make any new orders to threaten you.”

“So that means Kyouka’s—”

“She’s safe now... Well, I wish I could say that, but there’s another thing I’m worried about,” began Dazai. “Kyouka is still being held captive by the enemy. In other words, if Akutagawa finds out what happened, he might contact his colleagues and have Kyouka killed. Of course, I plan on finding her, but it’s going to be hard, since her captor can create illusions and essentially disappear with his skill. There’s only one way we can be certain she’ll be okay.”

“I need to kill Akutagawa before he gives orders to kill her...,” replied Atsushi so calmly that he sounded delirious. He tightly squeezed the transceiver in his hand.

“Save Kyouka, Atsushi.”

The connection cut off. Atsushi curled forward as he held the now silent handheld transceiver. His back trembled from the fear that had nowhere else to go.

But that trembling found an exit, and it suddenly stopped.

““Those who fail to protect others do not deserve to live.””

Atsushi shifted his gaze forward, a cold, pale fire burning in his eyes.

#3

My name is Sakunosuke Oda. I'm a detective with the Armed Detective Agency. Some say the quickest way to get to know someone is to find out what they do for work. They may have a point, but that rule doesn't apply to me. Why? Because I don't have the mentality or the talent to be a detective. I'm just an ordinary, worn-out guy. Nothing more than a two-bit agent. No different from a cigarette butt on the ground.

Two years ago, I solved the "Azure Apostle" case and joined the detective agency. I can still remember those days like it was yesterday. One moment, everything was leaning to the right, then the next, everything was leaning to the left. The case was rocky, so I grabbed onto the closest thing I could, and it took everything I had just to hold on and wait it out. It was mere coincidence that I was able to solve the case. Beginner's luck.

Nevertheless, I managed to solve it, which meant I passed the test. Ever since then, I've been solving whatever cases the agency throws at me to make a living. I take care of orphans, drink coffee, and on my days off, I do a little gambling before writing novels in the kitchen at night. That's my life. It's a humble, cozy life. Nothing to brag about, but I like it.

Today's work at the agency was a little peculiar, though.

I was walking down the shopping arcade to meet someone. It was almost nightfall. Everyone was quietly coming and going like creatures of the deep sea as the orange evening sun sank into the horizon. There was a stain at the end of the pavement where someone threw up last night. A young man's silver bicycle passed by me, its wheels lit up like some sort of spacecraft. The townscape was the color of dingy coffee jelly. I just couldn't bring myself to hate this place.

My job today had to do with the new recruit Akutagawa. He'd broken into the

Port Mafia's headquarters, an underground organization that had spread its roots deep within this city. Saying he had a few screws loose would be putting it lightly. He might as well have smashed his bones with a hammer and fed them to the wolves. That would've made more sense than infiltrating the Mafia's headquarters. Incidentally, I was the one who'd invited him to join the detective agency.

Once again, I'd shot myself in the foot. As always. At this point, it had become a bad habit I just couldn't shake, so all I could do was accept it. What I needed to do now, however, was worry about the new recruit, since he was a hundred times more messed up in the head than me.

The new guy—Akutagawa—was a powerful skill user who had been through hell and back many times. If anyone was capable of penetrating Port Mafia's defenses and reuniting with their sister, it was Akutagawa.

But that's the end of the line for him. Akutagawa would never be able to get his old life back. Port Mafia was like the night breeze that blew through the darkest areas of this city. Not even a single back alley or gutter was out of their reach. Even if Akutagawa managed to get his sister back and escape their headquarters, Port Mafia would find them, hang them upside down, and parade them through the streets. They would slit the siblings' throats, put them on hooks, and show everyone what happens to those who oppose the Mafia.

That was why the president gave me orders to rescue them—to make sure Akutagawa saved his sister's life and they returned to the agency safely. My job was to help them after they escaped.

There was no way the Mafia would let either Akutagawa or his sister go. It'd make them look bad. If they let an intruder like Akutagawa go free, they'd just seem weak to anyone outside the Mafia, and if they let his sister leave, they'd appear weak to those inside the organization. Money or privileges weren't enough to wipe the slate clean. What could we do, then?

After much consideration, I came to a single conclusion: Threaten them. That was the only way. Tell the Mafia that I was going to give the government information on them that would sink them for good. Then, in return for this information, they would promise to leave Akutagawa alone. To do this,

however, I needed help from someone on the inside. It couldn't be just any collaborator, though. It had to be someone who played a pivotal role in the Mafia. Ideally, someone who worked close to the heart of their money. After all, money was like blood to the organization, and a living creature can't survive if you pump poison into its bloodstream.

I investigated and tracked criminals working underground until I found "the one": a Mafia accountant who handled their finances. He was an old man who'd worked for years as the organization's safe keeper by laundering their money. His hobbies included bonsai and chess. He'd asked to meet at an old bar in a back alley.

It was nightfall, and the bar still wasn't open yet, but the wooden door was ajar—maybe he'd pulled some strings for us. I walked through the doorway and began descending the staircase. The dark, dry staircase to the basement made me feel as if I were going back in time. I could faintly hear jazz music coming from the bar.

The inside was as cramped as a shoebox and quiet. A counter, barstools, various brands of bottled liquor lined up against the wall—but no bartender.

The man I was planning to meet was already sitting in the back. He stared despondently at his liquor-filled glass while running his finger around the rim. I blinked.

"...Who are you?"

It wasn't the old man who was sitting there.

The person raised his head when he heard my voice and looked up at me through his long eyelashes. His lips curled into a smile so subtle I thought I was maybe imagining things.

"Hey, Odasaku. Long time no see," said the young man wearing a black overcoat. "Still too early to have a drink?"



I'm scared.

I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared.

It chased me from the darkness. I desperately tried to run away. I didn't even care if my legs snapped off or my lungs burst. I ran as fast as I could. I tried to get away, but there was no escape—because the monster was inside my head.

“Do not——no matter what, Atsushi.”

A voice from my past echoed in my mind. Whose voice was it? It was Dazai's. It turned into a black chain and coiled around my body. It was a cursed voice.

“Do not——no matter what, Atsushi.”

I couldn't escape no matter how fast I ran.

I know it'll come after me no matter where I go.

I wanted to scream, but I had no throat. I wanted to cry, but I had no eyes. My entire body trembled so violently that it felt like it was going to shatter into a million pieces. I continued to run away from myself.

But you can't run away from yourself. Nobody can.

Atsushi sped through the Mafia headquarters with his head bent forward, almost exactly how a beast would run. He kicked off the walls while he turned the corners and leaped up the staircase, ascending the building at any angle he could. All he could think about was catching up with Akutagawa—saving Kyouka, in other words. Everything else had vanished from his mind.

He saw armed Mafia soldiers at the end of the passageway. There were around eight of them, and they were blocking Atsushi's path.

“Move.”

Like a tornado or cannonball, Atsushi thrust himself through the group with a growl. The impact slammed the soldiers against the wall, knocking most of them out before they even really knew what hit them. One of the soldiers noticed Atsushi coming and reflexively raised his gun, but the moment Atsushi passed by him, his pistol had already been sliced into pieces. By the time the soldier realized this, blood had already begun spraying out of his arm and body as well. There were no conscious soldiers left after the calamity passed. Atsushi was hardly even aware of what he had just done. He simply kept moving forward to escape the fear.

“Do not——no matter what, Atsushi.”

Akutagawa’s back finally came into view. Atsushi howled, then sped up. Akutagawa turned around at the sound of the ominous voice. He tried to spread his overcoat like a curtain to create a wall of defense, but Atsushi was quicker. He lunged at Akutagawa’s chest, knocking his overcoat out of the way before he had a chance to attack.

“Do not go to——no matter what, Atsushi.”

Atsushi howled.

“Awooooooooooo!!”

“What the—?!”

Atsushi’s fist slammed into his stunned opponent’s face, bending Akutagawa’s neck back as far as it would go. Akutagawa was sent flying as if he had just been hit by a truck; then he lost consciousness the moment he crashed into the wall before dropping face forward toward the ground like a marionette that had its strings cut. But he never hit the ground—Atsushi rushed forward and grabbed Akutagawa’s shoulders, stopping him midair.

The beast roared.

He pinned Akutagawa’s shoulder against the wall and punched his torso relentlessly.

Punch. Punch. Punch. Punch. Punch. It was like a machine gun rhythmically unloading bullet after bullet, shattering Akutagawa’s bones and forming cracks in the wall behind him. His body swung like a pendulum.

Atsushi’s bare hands could slice the barrel of a gun in two. A single punch would be fatal to any ordinary person, and Akutagawa was being barraged with dozens. No matter how many times he hit him, Atsushi didn’t stop. His eyes, opened wide, were wavering with overpowering terror. His hands trembled. His teeth chattered. A cold sweat poured down his body.

I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m scared.

“Do not go to——no matter what, Atsushi.”

Atsushi didn’t stop attacking. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t. He was a

prisoner of fear. His body wouldn't listen to him anymore.

His fractured soul was screaming. He couldn't stop; it continued to splinter... ever since that day one year ago.

"...It out."

Atsushi's fist stopped. Akutagawa's lips moved to form words:

"I've...figured...it out—What you feel...isn't *fear*."

A terrifying chill ran down Atsushi's spine, and he ceased breathing.

"That emotion...is *guilt*."

All Atsushi could see was a white light as the unbearable emotion consumed every one of his brain cells.

"Ah..."

He could hear a voice. The voice of his master:

"I'm giving you orders as your boss."

It was a voice of the past. A black chain that bound him.

"Do not go to the orphanage no matter what, Atsushi... Got it?"

.....

I didn't follow orders that day. The Mafia's orders. Dazai's orders. Orders that I had to obey at all costs.

I attacked the orphanage.

I was already a member of the Mafia's commando unit one year ago. I was the leader with a few men of my own, and I had power—I had information. I could make investigations into violent incidents go away just by leaking information to a collaborator in the city police.

But I only did it once...to erase my past.

Inside every person's mind is a small child.

It's you. It's your childhood self, sobbing in the darkness—a younger version of yourself whom nobody can ever understand, whom nobody will ever extend a helping hand to. People will do anything to calm that child or to get them to

stop crying...no matter how inhumane it may be.

For me, that was burning the prison of my past to ashes and killing the demon within.

It was ridiculously simple, to tell the truth. I sealed off the premises with my men, then began the attack. After cutting the telephone line and destroying all their parked vehicles, I turned into the tiger and rushed into the dormitory.

I was afraid, but it wasn't the fear of committing a sin. It was the fear that *I might lose to the orphanage director*. I was afraid that he could just look at me, and blood would burst out of my body as I dropped to the ground. I needed years to overcome that fear. I came up with plan after plan, but I would get cold feet every time.

Today, however, I would overcome the fear. I would win.

There were a few reasons why I was able to summon the courage. One was something that would seem to be of little significance to others, but that day was my birthday. That's why I wanted to make the day I was born, in the truest sense, the birth of something new.

The orphanage, which I hadn't seen for three years, looked so tiny and miserable. The plaster walls were cracked, the pathways were just dirt that hadn't been paved, and the well for drinking water had dried up. It was like looking at weather-beaten bones, which had been slowly wasting away.

Nevertheless, every step I took removed a scab from my memories, and I inevitably bled. The alley where I was punched until my teeth chipped and broke, the disciplinary room with fingernails still stuck in the wall where I used to scratch until they broke off, the pantry I snuck into out of hunger but was so afraid of being punished that I couldn't leave—I had to burn it all, or the child in my memories would never stop crying. It was simple. Something anyone could understand. Today was my birthday. Today was the day I was going to reduce my prison to ashes and be born again.

I ran through the orphanage, which I faithfully remembered to the finest detail, until I arrived at the demon lord's castle—the director's office. I kicked the door open, and immediately, my heart froze. The director was staring right at me from the back of the room with his arms crossed.

“You’re late, Number Seventy-Eight,” he snapped.

It was an ambush. There was neither fear nor surprise on his face. All there was, was his usual frigid gaze. They were the eyes of a man who looked down on the orphans and ruled over them.

“D-don’t call me that,” I managed to stammer with as much force as I could.

But he simply looked at me as if he could see right through me.

“It appears you made it to your graduation just in time,” noted the director.

“‘Graduation’?”

The door suddenly slammed shut behind me. The sturdy iron door automatically closed, followed by the sound of it locking. I didn’t know at the time, but the director’s office could automatically close and lock. The only reason I was able to walk inside was because he had unlocked the door in advance for me.

An alarm went off. It was the bell for cleanup time after lunch. My body suddenly wanted to start cleaning, and I had to make a mental effort to stop myself.

“Does it bring back memories?” asked the director as he looked down at me. “It’s the sound of order. It’s the sound that let you all know what governed you.”

“You’re right.” I glared at the director. “There aren’t any clocks here, so this alarm was the only way we knew when to do what. This sound held us hostage because there was only one person in the orphanage who had a clock: you.”

I looked up at the clock on the wall. It was an antique amber pendulum clock. Even now, the second hand marked the passage of time like a god.

“‘Owning a clock is proof of a strong, independent will,’” I recited, since I had heard him say it hundreds of times.

“Therefore...”

“‘Therefore, those of you who were born to be ruled and disciplined have no need for a clock.’” I finished reciting one of his favorite stock phrases. “So you made it a rule that we couldn’t have clocks. One of the older kids tried to buy

one once after saving up his money, but he was kicked out of the orphanage... after he was beaten nearly to death.”

“Yes. But you never did something so foolish, Number Seventy-Eight. You were obedient. Submissive,” he added before picking up a white wooden box on his desk. I’d never seen it before. It was a plain box slightly larger than the palm of his hand.

“What’s in that box?” My voice was trembling.

“Isn’t it obvious?” The director spoke in a flat voice. “It’s something you need to graduate from here.”

An ambush. A box. I had a bad feeling in my gut that had swelled all the way up to my throat.

“‘Graduate’? What are you talking about? What’s in that box?! What are you scheming?!”

The director slowly approached me with the box still in hand. Cold sweat began to pour down my entire body.

There was probably a weapon in the box, yet my body wouldn’t move.

I repeatedly tried to convince myself to calm down. I would easily win in hand-to-hand combat. Even if there was a gun in that wooden box, a small pistol couldn’t kill me.

However, the director knew I was coming, and he surely knew about the tiger within me as well. Which meant...

A bomb?

If there was an explosion in a sealed-off room like this, the reflection of the blast waves would increase the lethality severalfold. A high explosive would probably blow my head off before I could heal myself with the regeneration capability of the tiger. I focused my tiger’s hearing, then froze—because I could hear what was inside the wooden box. It was the passage of time. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

This isn’t good.

“Do you remember what I taught you?” The director slowly approached me.

“Those who fail to protect others do not deserve to live.”

“Stop,” I begged, my voice trembling. “Stay back.”

The director stood right in front of me and spread his arms. A colossal ruler.

My feet instinctively took a step back. It was fate. I was helpless before him.

No. No. No. No.

Fight it. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight it, Atsushi. Or you'll die!

The tips of my fingers and toes trembled. My racing heart hammered against my chest.

This was fear—the absolute ruler etched into my soul.

“Today marks the last day of my teachings to you.”

“Stop...!”

Fight it. Fight it. Fight it. Fight it.

Fight it!

Every cell in my body screamed.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

I heard the sound of something moist.

My arm had pierced the director's chest, and my fingers were sticking out of his back.

“...”

He whispered something. I heard what he said, but I couldn't process it. Red alarm bells rang in my mind as it continued screaming the words *Fight it*.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

I shoved the director and straddled his body as he lay on the ground.

I punched him. Over and over again. Copious amounts of blood splattered onto the floor. Even though I could feel his skull crack and break, I didn't stop punching. Only when there was nothing left to punch and my fist slammed into the hard floor did I stop. Just then, I caught a glimpse of the wooden box out of

the corner of my eye. The lid had fallen off and what was inside had rolled out. I looked at it.

It was a watch.

Next to the watch was a sheet of paper with the following written on it:

Happy birthday

What?

What is this?

Why is this written here? Why is there a watch inside the box?

"Owning a clock is proof of a strong, independent will."

It was a brand-new watch. It must have been hard for a run-down orphanage like this to afford such a high-end piece.

"It's something you need to graduate from here."

That was when I finally managed to process the director's final words to me:

"Yes... Just like that."

The director had held his arms out wide before me...like a father embracing his child. The truth was clear. But no matter how quickly the truth pierced my heart, my brain simply wasn't trying to understand.

The director was dead on the floor. Never would he say another word.

That was the moment it suddenly hit me. No matter how much stronger I got or how much I grew, no matter how proud I was of myself, he would never be able to tell me "good job" or say "I'm impressed" ever again.

There was a possibility he would've said that. One day. If he were alive.

But he didn't say anything. I would never be able to hear the one thing I wanted the most in this world.

Because I'd killed him.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"



Looking back, there were a few things that didn't add up. I had no idea I was a man-eating tiger. The orphanage director and the others kept it a secret from me. There was a fiendish white tiger who ravaged the orphanage and hurt people. And this tiger hadn't appeared only a few times, so at the very least, my teachers at the orphanage surely knew that it was me. And yet, nobody ever told me.

It wasn't until much later that I found out why.

There was a researcher who came to the orphanage to secretly investigate the tiger, but it killed him. He had long hair the color of white mist and eyes as red as apples. Had his death gone public, the military police would've intervened and killed the dangerous tiger—me.

But the director covered up the accident. He threw the researcher's body into a river and burned his belongings. He then got the teachers together so they could coordinate their story: "No researcher ever came here." Then, after checking if I had any memory of what happened when I was a tiger, the director locked me in a basement cell. He continued handling the aftermath every time the tiger went berserk going forward. He locked me in the basement in seclusion so there wouldn't be any victims—so I wouldn't hurt anyone.

That was why I always believed that the tiger was a savage beast that came from somewhere far, far away. The director knew me better than anyone else. He even understood that I wouldn't be able to bear it if I knew that I was the tiger. And he knew that he had to continue protecting me, keeping me from going into the outside world, until I was old enough to be able to control the tiger and accept what I am.



"That emotion...is guilt," wheezed Akutagawa as his shoulder was pinned against the wall.

"Ah..." Atsushi's eyes lost their focus. "Ah... Ahhh... Ahhhhhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhh...!"

He screamed and threw Akutagawa into the air. Akutagawa's body bent into unnatural positions until it hit the ground; then it bounced once more before

rolling by a window near the corner of the building. Atsushi landed on his body as he lay faceup. He straddled Akutagawa tightly with his legs and punched him over and over with both hands like a meteor shower. The floor under Akutagawa slowly cratered as concrete scattered in every direction. Akutagawa was no longer even attempting to use his overcoat for defense. It was absolute destruction, far more than any human could take—like a planet being engulfed by countless meteorites.

“You’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong!” bawled Atsushi as he punched Akutagawa. “I didn’t know! I didn’t know...any other way...!”

“A common excuse used by weaklings,” Akutagawa suddenly mumbled.

There was a dull sound. Atsushi’s arm was severed at the elbow, leaving a trail of blood as it rolled across the floor.

“...?”

Fabric blades wriggled around Akutagawa’s body as if they had sprung back to life before immediately piercing Atsushi’s shoulders, stomach, throat, and thighs like a spear, pinning him against the wall.

“Gwah...!”

Akutagawa slowly stood up like a ghost. Blood was dripping down every part of his body, but he walked with purpose.

“How...?” muttered Atsushi while gurgling blood. “After...all...that...”

“I slit open my own skin before you punched me. I then created a tear in space itself to prevent your attacks from reaching my muscle and bone,” revealed Akutagawa while rubbing his skin. “This was my trump card. My final line of defense. I certainly wasn’t expecting to use it so soon, though.”

The blades piercing Atsushi’s body began to twist and expand, causing him to scream as the fabric raked his flesh.

“A skill user fueled by fear and atonement...,” began Akutagawa as he approached Atsushi. “It’s not difficult to imagine your fear. Nothing in this world is worse than regret. Living one’s life always wondering ‘If only I had done that instead’ is pure hell.”

Atsushi's face trembled with fear. Akutagawa continued approaching him with a razor-sharp glare.

"However, at this moment, all you are to me is a barrier between me and my sister. I never wish to regret again. That is why I must cut you down and continue forward."

Akutagawa's blade turned into a guillotine and rose into the air right before Atsushi's eyes.



It was the Mafia headquarters' central control monitoring room on the thirty-fifth floor. Gin opened the door to the dimly lit space and rushed inside, trying to catch her breath. With heavy feet, she tottered over to the wall near the monitoring control board and placed her hand on it. Immediately, her knees gave out, and she feebly dropped to the floor into a sitting position.

"Ryuunosuke..."

She leaned her head against the wall while clutching her knees as if she was stranded all alone on a snowy mountain. The room was empty. Dim. Only the myriad monitors displaying every room in the building illuminated the space, but there was no warmth in their light. Akutagawa and Atsushi could be seen on one of the monitors. Akutagawa, who had Atsushi pinned down with his skill, was about to take his life.

"Ryuunosuke... That's enough," she insisted, her voice hoarse. "You'll never be able to make it out of here alive if you kill any more..."

Gin was trembling but not because she was cold. She staggered to her feet and approached the control board.

"I don't care what kind of person you are."

She weakly turned the control key and pressed the numbered switch.

"All I want is for you to live."

She picked up the intercom on the desk and placed it to her ear.

"Ryuunosuke, stop," Gin said into the intercom. "Go home."



“Ryuunosuke, stop.”

Gin’s voice echoed throughout the hall that Akutagawa and Atsushi were in.

“Go home.”

“Gin.” Akutagawa looked around to see where her voice was coming from.

“Gin, where are you?”

“Just forget about me and go home.” Gin sounded like she was trying to hold back her emotions. “Don’t you understand? I could’ve gone to see you anytime if I wanted. I wasn’t kidnapped four years ago. I decided on my own to accept the boss’s—that lonely man’s—invitation. The reason why I never went to see you was because you’re not capable of having loved ones in your life.”

“What?” Flustered, Akutagawa looked up in the direction Gin’s voice was coming from. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“The way you destroy things is different from how the Mafia does it. The Mafia’s destruction has rationality and purpose, but you don’t. Even those you love get dragged into your violence as you destroy everything around you. Even yourself. Because...”

Gin paused. Her voice was silent as if she were breathing in the courage she needed; then she confessed, “Because you were born to do evil.”

Akutagawa’s arms dropped to his sides lifelessly. His face was like that of a lost child who got separated from his parents.

“Me? Evil? Is that why you won’t come back with me?” asked Akutagawa in confusion. “That doesn’t make any sense, Gin. Nothing does. What are you saying? I don’t understand.”

There was no reply.

“Gin, answer me! What do I lack? What can I do to get you back?”

And no reply would ever come.

The intercom system had already been shut off.

“Gin, answer me! I beg of you! Gin...!”

The wall suddenly shattered into pieces, scattering bits of concrete and dust into the air. But before Akutagawa could even look back, Rashomon's fabric was torn off. A beast roared. It wasn't Atsushi, though. It wasn't even human.

"What?!" Taken aback, Akutagawa's eyes opened wide. "A white tiger?!"

A beast the size of a small car charged into him until they crashed into a window together, shattering the glass and breaking right through it. All that awaited them now...was an empty sky.

Akutagawa and the white tiger fell out the window of the Mafia headquarters.



"Long time no see?" I repeated to the man as I approached him. "Have we met?"

The young man, who was waiting for me at the bar, wore a mellow smile that seemed so natural on him.

"No. This is the first time," he replied while clinking the ice in his glass. "First time I've ever been to this bar, first time I ever drank here, and the first time you and I have ever met here, Odasaku."

I looked around the bar once more. The walls stained with cigarette smoke, the pillars that had turned almost completely black with age, the liquor cabinet and lights: Nothing could escape the long, long passage of time. It was a small bar. Cramped. A customer could barely walk through the place without bumping into someone else. Every piece that contributed to the bar's ambience was quiet and intimate. It was a space created for spending time alone with someone in secret.

Jazz softly played in the background. It was a song about a heartbreaking farewell. Not a bad place for a drink but not quite the sort of place you'd go if you were about to betray the Mafia.

"Let me ask you a question." Something was bothering me. "Is 'Odasaku' my new nickname or something?"

"Yep." The young man smiled hesitantly. "Nobody's ever called you that

before?”

“No one,” I honestly replied. Most people I know call me Oda. I would’ve remembered if someone gave me such a weird nickname.

The man turned away from me, lowered his gaze, and smiled. He wasn’t smiling at me. He was smiling for himself. But it seemed forced as if he had no idea what kind of expression to make.

What a strange guy.

“Anyway, have a seat, Odasaku.” He pointed to the counter seat next to him. “What’s your poison?”

“I’ll have a gimlet. No bitters.”

I sat one seat away from where he’d pointed to. Just in case. After staring at the empty spot next to him as if he was reflecting on something, he walked over to the other side of the counter and started making a drink. He then introduced himself as Dazai.

After returning to his seat, Dazai raised his glass into the air as if to say “Cheers,” but I didn’t return the gesture. I didn’t even take a sip of my own drink. After all, I still needed to see if this man was worth trusting.

Dazai drank alone for some time after that. Only the sound of the ice clinking in his glass—a substitute for words—filled the air.

“Odasaku, I’ve got an interesting story. Want to hear it?” he suddenly asked as if he couldn’t take the silence any longer.

“What is it?”

“I defused a bomb the other day. Finally, right?”

The young man fixed me with an earnest gaze. His eyes were strong, staring directly into mine.

“My wish finally came true. I was so excited I started to dance with the unexploded bomb in my arms! I’ve been waiting so long to tell you that.”

“Oh. Huh,” I replied.

Even I thought it was a ridiculous reply, but I had absolutely no idea what the

point of his story was or where he was trying to go by telling it to me.

“One more thing: I finally perfected that hard tofu recipe I’ve been wanting you to eat. It’s three times harder and more flavorful now! I made one of my men taste a piece, and he broke his tooth on it. You’ll need to be careful when you try it for yourself!”

“Is it really that hard?” I asked. “How are you supposed to eat it, then?”

“I don’t even know, to tell the truth!” he said with a grin. He seemed genuinely happy. My impression of this smiley young man had completely changed from when I first met him moments ago. He may have been an adult, but his boyish voice made him sound far younger. He smiled like a lost child who had finally found his house.

“Oh yeah. I almost forgot. There’s something important I wanted to ask you, Odasaku... I heard you got the Rookie of the Year award for your novel.”

I was stunned. “How did you know that?”

“There’s nothing I can’t find with a little digging.”

His lips curled into a cryptic smirk. After scratching my head, I replied, “That’s not exactly what happened, though. This guy at some publishing agency just happened to come across one of the garbage stories I was writing for practice. He asked me if I wanted to write a novel, and I said yes. In all honesty, though, I’m not confident it’s any good.”

“Why is that?”

“Because there’s only one story I want to write, and it’s in here.” I tapped my temple. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the necessary tools or skills to bring this story to life. I feel like a lost mountaineer standing before the tallest, most sacred mountain in the world with just a single, tiny ice ax.”

“You already have the tools,” claimed the young man with crystal clear eyes. “If you can’t write it, then nobody in this world can. I guarantee it. You’re much better than you think.”

“Thanks. But it’s hard to take someone’s word for it when you’ve just only met.”

I simply said the first thing that came to mind. The young man's glass clinked, and I looked over to find him frozen with his drink still in hand. The glass, his boyish expression, even his breathing seemed to be frozen in time. I imagined something completely ridiculous for a moment: I felt as if the young man sitting before me was about to cry. But that wouldn't make any sense. It wasn't logical.

And as I expected, his expression instantly returned to normal.

"You're right," he agreed. "I don't know what's gotten into me. Please forget I said anything."

His cheerful, boyish expression was now gone. After pondering for a moment, I decide to bring up the main issue.

"One of my men is in danger," I said. "I'm sure you've heard the gist of what's going on, but he's gotten himself into a little mess at the Mafia headquarters. It'd be a miracle if he made it back out in one piece. Even if he did make it out alive, the Mafia would hunt him down for the rest of his life, so I came here to make sure that wouldn't happen. I'm hoping we can come to an agreement that'll benefit us both."

The young man observed me in silence. It was as if he were staring at me from a thousand years in the future. He then murmured, "Akutagawa's lucky to have come across a good friend like you."

"What?"

"You don't need to worry about Akutagawa. After today, the Mafia will never lay another finger on him. There's no catch; he'll be able to live the rest of his life in peace... Besides, this is what I've had planned since the beginning...if he makes it out of the Mafia headquarters alive, that is."

I quietly stared at the young man without moving a muscle. He said he was planning on letting Akutagawa go from the beginning, which gave rise to an idea. It was a wild idea, but everything would fall into place if I was right. I decided to ask a leading question.

"Why did you lure Akutagawa into the Mafia headquarters, Dazai?"

Faint cracks appeared in the young man's expression. For a brief moment, he seemed as shocked as if he had been stabbed right in the heart. Only for a brief

moment, though. His sage smile, like that of a man who had been alive for thousands of years, immediately returned.

“Looks like I can’t fool you,” he quipped.

“It was just a lucky guess.” I shook my head. “But my suspicions were well-grounded. First, you knew Akutagawa’s name even though I never once mentioned the deal was about him. Plus, you said your plan from the start was never to go after him or retaliate. In other words, you knew in advance that he was going to sneak into the Mafia headquarters. There’s only one person who could’ve predicted that: the man who sent the letter and photo to the detective agency—the Mafia’s boss.”

I set my glass on the counter, then took something out of my pocket and placed it by my glass. Dazai’s eyes were naturally drawn to it.

“...What’s that?” he asked.

It was a gun aimed right for Dazai.

“A sign that this negotiation is over,” I explained flatly. “While I don’t feel completely safe even with a gun to your head, I unfortunately don’t have anything else on me today.”

It was an old, well-cared-for pistol. We’d gone through so much together over the years that I basically considered it my partner. I could hit a target with this gun even with my eyes closed.

Dazai didn’t seem too appreciative of my gesture, though. He looked at the gun as if he was trying to restrain himself.

“Put that gun away.”

“I can’t,” I told him while lightly placing my finger on the trigger. “Not when I’m up against the Port Mafia’s boss—especially if this meeting itself is one of the Mafia’s traps.”

“I didn’t become the boss because I wanted to.” His piercing gaze bored a hole right through me. “That’s the truth.”

His eyes were so genuine that I almost started to believe him, but this was the Port Mafia’s legendary boss. Lying to a two-bit detective like me was probably

easier than breathing for him. I tightened my grip around my gun.

“Looks like I need to come up with a new plan to save Akutagawa,” I noted. “If I make it out of this bar alive, that is.”

“This isn’t a trap. I would never even dream of doing something like that to you,” Dazai insisted. He still sounded like he was telling the truth.

Damn it. I couldn’t even trust my own eyes anymore. I’d probably do better at negotiating and getting out of here alive if I gouged them out.

“Odasaku, you asked me why I lured Akutagawa to the Mafia headquarters,” he began. “I did it to protect this world.”

“‘This world’?”

“This is but one of countless worlds,” he replied while shooting me a pleading look. “And in another—in the original world, you and I were friends. We drank at this bar and spent time together talking about the most ridiculous things.”

I gave thought to the possibility.

“Even if that were true...,” I said, “...that doesn’t change what you did to Akutagawa.”

The young man tried to say something, but he seemed unable to find the right words. He spoke in a halting tone. “Odasaku, listen. I—”

“Don’t call me that.” Even I was surprised with how sharp my tone was. “My enemies have no business calling me that.”

He suddenly looked like he was struggling to breathe. His face twisted, and his eyes wandered about meaninglessly. He opened his mouth, then closed it. It was as if he was fighting something that couldn’t be seen.



“It was hard,” muttered the young man. “It was really hard fighting Mimic without you in the organization. I had no choice but to take over for Mori and make enemies of everyone around me to expand the business. Everything I did was for this world’s—”

Dazai’s gasping words vanished into thin air with a sigh. Remnant particles of his emotions wandered about the bar. Nobody said anything for a while after that. Only silence. Like a sweet farewell, a melancholic piano tune began to play in the background.

“The reason I invited you here was to say good-bye,” he said after a few minutes passed. “A life with someone you can say good-bye to is a good life, especially when it hurts so much to say it to them. Am I wrong?”

After thinking for a few moments, I told him he was right. Dazai looked a touch relieved as he stood up out of his chair.

“I’m out.” He quietly stared down the barrel of my gun, then locked eyes with me. “If you want to shoot me, then do it. But if I’m allowed one request, I ask that you don’t shoot me here. Not at this bar. I don’t care if you shoot me anywhere else, though.”

I looked at Dazai. I didn’t know why, but I wanted to honor his request. I slipped my gun back into my pocket.

“Thank you.” Dazai faintly smiled before he turned his back to me and began leaving. “Good-bye, Odasaku.”

Dazai ascended the staircase until he was out of sight, never to look back again. The last thing I heard was the door softly shutting behind him.



Akutagawa and the tiger were falling from the sky.

“Tsk...!”

Akutagawa unleashed Rashomon’s cloth in midair. They were thirty stories high. A direct impact against the ground would be too much for even the strongest body. Akutagawa’s only option was to pierce the building with

Rashomon's blades to support his weight. However, he was thrown out the window with significant momentum, so he was a few yards away from the outer wall. Akutagawa shot every blade he had at the building's exterior...but it was still slightly out of reach. All of a sudden, the tiger kicked off the wall and slammed into him.

"Gwah...!"

Akutagawa coughed up blood, and his bones creaked. The white tiger, which weighed close to ten times more than him, had knocked him even farther away from the wall. The building was now but a distant mirage to Akutagawa. He looked in every direction, but there was nothing left for him to grab onto. All that was left was air.

It was evening as Akutagawa fell under the burning twilight sky. *Rashomon* was a powerful skill, but its range was limited, since he could only change the shape of the clothes he was wearing. Putting everything into his skill and stretching his overcoat as far as it would go would be a gamble, but he had no other choice. He decided to give it a try. But the tiger's fangs dug into his shoulder, preventing him from doing just that.

"Gwaaaaaaah!"

Its massive jaw bit into Akutagawa's flesh. Blood shot into the air as bones crunched in its mouth. Vital blood vessels snapped. The tiger could easily rip his shoulder off if it shook its head with a little force. Akutagawa slipped his skill's fabric under his skin to create some spur-of-the-moment armor. The tiger's extraordinary masseter strength and Akutagawa's skill, which could even cut through space itself, vied for dominance as the two boys continued to free-fall to the surface. They had under twenty stories left until they reached the bottom.

"Damn it!" Akutagawa cursed.

The tiger—Atsushi—would probably survive if he hit the ground because of his tough body and regenerative abilities, but Akutagawa would undoubtedly die.

Rashomon could tear through space and prevent the impact from colliding into the ground, but that didn't change the incredible speed at which

Akutagawa's body would crash-land. Such a sudden change in speed would be too much for his brain or organs to handle. The result would be like dropping a sturdy box with a cake inside onto the floor.

It seemed his only choice was to hook a fabric blade into the wall before landing...but he couldn't do that, either. The tiger would snap his shoulder right off if Akutagawa removed his only line of defense for even a single moment. He'd be dead before he even hit the ground.

In conclusion...death was the only answer.

"Like hell...," growled Akutagawa with blood in his throat. "Like hell...! I refuse to die! I refuse! I'm going to live and save my—"

"The reason why I never went to see you was because you're not capable of having loved ones in your life."

Akutagawa paused midsentence.

"Save my—"

"You'll never be a good person. It's clear as day."

"You're wrong."

"A man who took a girl hostage to threaten someone and only cares about what benefits him... A man who doesn't even realize his mission has transformed into nothing more than an appetite for destruction... That's you."

"No, no, no! You're wrong!"

"You just wanted revenge? Even if it killed you? Did you not even think of what would happen to your little sister if you left her all alone in a place like this?"

"I—"

"Because you were born to do evil."

Akutagawa whispered as if he were gasping for breath, "I..."

Oh.

It finally all makes sense.

So this was what Gin was trying to tell me.

This was why she couldn't be with me anymore.

The tension vanished from Akutagawa's expression. His fingers gripping the tiger's fur loosened. A man and a beast continued to fall, approaching the eternal abyss.

A swift turbulence in the air broke the silence. A steel beam shot right past Akutagawa's side and pierced the Mafia headquarters.

"What...?!"

Akutagawa stared at the beam with evident bewilderment.

It was just any ordinary steel beam, but unless he was seeing things, it looked like it came from the opposite direction of the building. But how could something like that—?

Wait.

There was someone standing on one of the middle floors of a high-rise building being built a few streets back, and they were holding a steel beam under their arm.

"Please...! Grab—on—to—thiiiis!" they shouted. It was Kenji Miyazawa from the detective agency.

After raising the steel beam into the air, he rested it on his shoulder like a javelin thrower, then broke into a run.

"Don't tell me he—" Akutagawa's eyes bulged from their sockets. "From that far away?"

"Haaaaaaah!"

Kenji hurled the steel beam. The hunk of metal, around the size of two adults, sliced through the air and across the street. It flew like a speeding bullet before slipping right under Akutagawa's legs and piercing the Mafia headquarters' exterior. The impact sent concrete flying, and the entire building shook.

I...should be able to reach that.

Akutagawa focused his hazy mind and extended his overcoat toward the beam. By using every last fiber his clothes had, he managed to just barely reach

the tip. Bending the fabric like a set of claws, he latched onto the beam and anchored himself, then swung his entire body. His skill started pulling him toward the wall.

The tiger roared. It opened its jaws and aimed for Akutagawa's neck to keep him from getting away.

"Rashomon: Ibara."

Numerous thorns immediately emerged from Akutagawa's overcoat, which he was using for defense, and crawled into the tiger's mouth. They rapidly multiplied until they pierced its face from the inside of its jaw. The beast roared in agony. After Akutagawa grabbed onto the steel beam, he swung himself like a pendulum before landing on the exterior wall. He used his overcoat like cushioning to absorb most of the impact while piercing the wall with his blade to anchor his body in.

Akutagawa let out a short sigh after barely escaping certain death by the skin of his teeth.

If the tiger kept falling at this rate, he might have enough time to grab his sister and escape.

Akutagawa turned around to check on the tiger, but it was gone. It was nowhere to be found.

"What?!"

At the very next moment, something started to drag Akutagawa's body in the direction he'd just come from. As he held on to the blade stuck into the wall for dear life, he looked in the direction of the force pulling him, only to find someone at the other end of his overcoat.

"I won't let you escape." It was Atsushi. He had turned back into a human and used Akutagawa's attack to his advantage by grabbing onto the fabric. "I won't let you get away, Akutagawa. Not you."

He yanked on the overcoat. Atsushi was pulling Akutagawa with the entire weight of his body, but all Akutagawa could do was resist. Atsushi started to swing like a pendulum until he landed on the wall as well, digging his toes and fingers into the concrete to anchor himself after transforming them into tiger

claws. Two skill users were hanging face-to-face on the Mafia's headquarters building exterior: Atsushi, who was clinging to the wall with his four tiger claws, and Akutagawa, who was dangling at an angle with his overcoat's blades piercing the wall.

"I can't...allow you...to live...for a second longer." Fear wavered in Atsushi's eyes as he glared at Akutagawa. "Because I have to...keep my promise...to the orphanage director."

His severed arm had already regenerated thanks to the tiger's extraordinary healing powers.

"You can...completely heal your wounds...even after...being stabbed so many times?" panted Akutagawa while applying pressure to his wounded shoulder. "So this is...the Port Mafia's...White Reaper..."

Akutagawa had taken emergency measures to stop his shoulder from bleeding using his skill's fabric, but that wouldn't restore all the blood he'd lost, nor would it heal his broken bones. His body was as fragile as any other person's. He didn't have unlimited regeneration capabilities like Atsushi, so if they kept fighting, he would eventually die once he started to lose concentration due to the blood loss.

He's strong.

The foundation of Atsushi's strength was manifold. He had a powerful skill, he had been training and gaining experience for the past four and half years, and most of all, he had a motive. It was a call from his past, no different than a curse. It was the cardiac stimulant known as regret.

Did Akutagawa have that in him?

I wanted to save my sister. I thought I did. My vow to save her was righteous and powerful. I could tear down even the strongest of fortresses by the power of that vow alone.

And yet...

"Tiger, you are my enemy. I want to kill you," began Akutagawa, his expression stricken with pain. "But if my true nature, which only allows me to wish death on my enemies, is the 'evil' that my sister spoke of...then what

should I do? What should I do with myself?”

“Do not pursue the beast within you.”

Oda told me that. He knew that a colossal beast lived inside of me—that a wicked beast was born the moment the Heartless Dog gained emotion on that day four and a half years ago. That beast abandoned my sister, lured me into the jaws of death, and destroyed everything.

That was why the man in black did not choose me.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” howled Akutagawa as he sprinted forward. Atsushi kicked off the wall while Akutagawa charged, concentrating his overcoat’s blades onto the soles of his shoes, until he and Atsushi clashed at a beastly speed. His overcoat’s sleeve transformed.

“Rashomon: Bite of the Silver Wolf!”

After his forearm transformed into the head of a giant wolf, Akutagawa swung his arm, hurling the beast in his opponent’s direction. Atsushi immediately held up both of his arms to block, but the beast simply bit down on them and buried its silver fangs in his flesh.

“Gwah!” Atsushi moaned painfully.

The silver wolf wriggled as it gradually grew larger. Akutagawa only had one option if he wanted to win before he bled out: purposely throw himself right in front of his opponent, where Atsushi would be in his element, and use every last bit of his skill’s power to end the battle as quickly as possible. There was no other way.

“Gr...!”

“Mn...!”

Akutagawa pushed his skill past its limitations, loosening the fabric that was wrapped around his wounds and causing blood to pour from his body. But even then, his ferocity didn’t wane. The wolf only grew in size and produced more fangs. The beast’s jaws creaked.

“...?! ”

Its mouth opened wide as Atsushi began prying it open with both hands from

the inside.

“Stop getting in my way.” Atsushi’s eyes glinted with a piercing amber light. ***“I won’t be able to...keep my promise...with the director...if you keep getting...in my wayyyyyyy—Ahhhhhhhhh!”***

Atsushi’s arms broke through the wolf’s jaws while destroying them in the process, causing the skill to vanish like mist.

“Impossible...!”

“Stop getting in my wayyyyyyyy!”

Atsushi’s right fist flew straight toward Akutagawa at point-blank range.

Spatial Break—No! I won’t make it in time!

Atsushi’s fist tore through the three layers of overcoat being used as cushioning before knocking his opponent skyward. Akutagawa’s body crashed through the building’s concrete, hollowing it out while shattering glass as he continued soaring upward.

The impact knocked him unconscious before the excruciating pain of hitting the wall woke him up again. Akutagawa repeatedly went in and out of consciousness as his body continued to grind through the building’s exterior.

After he reached close to the tenth floor, he saw it out of the corner of his eyes as his vision began fading. It was Atsushi dashing up the wall like an animal after its prey.

The White Reaper roared.

“This...ends...nowwwwww—Ahhhhhh!”

Atsushi swung his fist into the air...but Akutagawa’s fabric reacted a split second before it connected. It pierced the wall with its blade, using the recoil to push his body far away from the wall. Countless fragments of concrete and debris shot out as Atsushi’s fist slammed into the wall where his opponent once was.

“I must...keep my promise!” shouted Atsushi. ***“She will never die...”***

as long as I keep...my promiiiiise!"

He screamed at the top of his lungs, shaking the air around him. It even caused Akutagawa to faintly open his eyes as his overcoat suspended him in the air.

"Rashomon..." he murmured in almost a whisper, raising his arm and closing his eyes almost completely. *"...Misty Rain."*

Countless fine, threadlike blades immediately shot out of Akutagawa's entire body. The extremely fine needles had the power to cut through space itself. They clustered together and headed right for Atsushi, who promptly dodged with his extraordinary reaction speed. The shower of needles pierced the building's exterior beneath his feet, and the concrete burst like a splash of water.

As Atsushi continued running upward to escape the needles, Akutagawa followed him using his skill's thread to support his weight and suspend him in midair as if he were flying. His eyes were still almost completely shut; he looked like he was dozing off.

The two ran until they reached the summit of the building. The rooftop had a helipad, but there was no helicopter in sight. It was completely flat with only red guide lights and painted signs for landing.

Atsushi grabbed onto the edge of the roof before hurling himself up and rolling forward onto the rooftop. Akutagawa appeared right under him in pursuit. Numerous threads punctured the building, which allowed him to gracefully float, woodenly expressionless, as if he was asleep. His skill's threads writhed around him like an eerie mane. The sky behind him was dyed crimson as the burning setting sun melted into the horizon. He was a demon—a harbinger of worldly doom.

"Akutagawa..." Atsushi glared at the demon. *"I will...defeat you...!"*

Atsushi jumped into the air, heading straight for Akutagawa before throwing a right punch into his enemy's face with breathtaking speed. Akutagawa blocked the punch with *Spatial Break*, just in time to keep his skull from cracking.

Spatial Break produced a tear in space itself that could block anything from

getting by, no matter how powerful an attack.

However.

“Uwooooooh!”

A crack appeared on the tear in space. Every muscle in Atsushi’s body swelled as he focused all his skill’s powers on his fist in an attempt to break through the strange phenomenon.

“Uwoaaaaaah!”

Both Atsushi’s and Akutagawa’s clothes fluttered under the pressure of their powers colliding. As Atsushi’s overcoat flew off, his handheld transceiver fell out of its pocket and bounced off the rooftop. The crack spread throughout the tear as it slowly shattered.

“Uwoaaaahhh... Wha...what...?”

Atsushi couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Akutagawa, who had pursued him all the way to the roof, had his eyes completely shut. His breathing was extremely shallow, and his entire body was limp. He wasn’t the slightest bit worked up from battle.

Akutagawa was already unconscious.

He didn’t have even an ounce of strength left after pushing his body far beyond what it was capable of. It was his drive to fight and nothing more that was powering his skill.

“You went...that far...?”

Utterly amazed, Atsushi’s eyes opened wide, but almost immediately, they glowed with battle-ready ferocity once more.

“Then...let’s end this...!” His muscles swelled even further. “Ahhhhhh!”

With a high-pitched crack and flashes of dazzling light...the *Spatial Break* was destroyed, and Atsushi’s fist finally reached Akutagawa’s face, sending him flying back with a meteorite-like shock wave. Akutagawa immediately crashed into the ground. Concrete shot into the air as his body skidded until finally coming to a stop at the edge of the rooftop. It was a perfect hit—the most

damaging hit that Akutagawa had ever taken.

Atsushi slowly approached his unconscious foe. Even Akutagawa's autonomic defenses had far exceeded what they were capable of as they writhed to form blades, only to disintegrate due to the lack of power.

"It's over."

Atsushi's fingers suddenly extended into tiger claws. Right next to Akutagawa's body was the sky, which extended to the surface far below. There was no longer any distress on Akutagawa's unconscious face. All he could hear was the gentle sound of the wind.

"Kunikidaaa! Can I throw another one?"

"Kenji, wait! They're too high up! You'll hit Akutagawa if you throw one from here!"

Kenji and Kunikida were shouting on one of the middle floors in the building under construction across from the Mafia headquarters. Kunikida was looking through a pair of binoculars to check where exactly Akutagawa was positioned, while Kenji was waiting for his next order with a steel beam on his shoulder.

"Damn it! Akutagawa isn't moving! But there's no way we can back him up from this distance..."

The detective agency's president had ordered Kunikida and Kenji to come here and provide Akutagawa with backup, but Kenji wouldn't be able to accurately throw another steel beam all the way to the rooftop. Clenching his teeth, Kunikida growled.

"Is there...really nothing we can do...?!"

Akutagawa's eyes were closed. He felt neither pain nor anguish. Fighting was something far, far away on the other side of a thick membrane, and not even a single particle of light was able to make its way inside the abyss of his consciousness.

He thought about how he was going to die, yet he felt nothing—not a single emotion.

Akutagawa once told Oda that there were *two people* he wanted to kill. One

was the man in black, whom Akutagawa despised for kidnapping his sister and separating them for years.

The other one...was a boy named *Ryuunosuke Akutagawa*.

A boy who had lost his younger sister because he was shortsighted. Human garbage who said he was going to avenge his friends while indulging in slaughter and wasting his life. He was a cruel, wicked foe.

He was a beast born on that fateful night four and a half years ago—the night the Heartless Dog first experienced emotion.

Akutagawa thought about how Oda was right. How he mustn't pursue the beast within him. Because he couldn't win. No human could defeat their own self.

But one could force a draw.

The tiger's claws would surely cut off his head as long as he kept his eyes closed. The fight for revenge would finally be over, and he would at last be able to sleep, free from care.

He, who grew up in the slums with no one to rely on and no one who cared about him—he, who spent his entire life writhing in despair and resentment—could finally rest. He would finally be saved. He would at last be reunited with his friends.

Then what reason do I have to...?

Akutagawa suddenly heard a voice.

"Detectives don't give up. On your feet, Akutagawa."

He opened his eyes to find a handheld transceiver right in front of him. It was the one that had fallen out of Atsushi's pocket only moments ago, and there was a voice coming from it.

"I used a wire gun to break into the security office inside the Mafia building. I'm calling you from there." Kenji's voice, the sound of things breaking, and gunfire could be heard in the background. "Get up, Akutagawa. Listen—we detectives become the strongest people on earth whenever someone needs saving."

I am not a detective.

Akutagawa tried to speak, but his voice was gone. He thought someone intrinsically evil had no right to become a detective.

“You’re not evil,” Kunikida objected as if he could read his mind. “You just don’t know who you are yet. That’s all. Stand on the side of good with us. I am officially welcoming you to the agency. You’ve passed. From this moment on, you’re a detective.”

Akutagawa’s eyes opened wide just as the claws of the tiger were swinging toward him. The sharp, sparkling white claws looked like snow slowly falling from the sky.

“The moment you believe you’re a detective is the moment you become one. That conviction will give you the power you need. All you have to do is believe.”

“Mmm...mm...”

Akutagawa opened his eyes with a groan.

“Uwahhhhhhhhh!”

Every fiber of fabric on his body burst forth and twisted around his right arm. He immediately stood up, using the momentum to throw his right arm up. As Atsushi’s fist descended, Akutagawa’s fist ascended.

“Rashomon: Dragon Drill Spear!”

Their fists collided. The powerful torrent that resulted created a storm that tore away at their bodies. Concrete began to violently peel off the ground as it cratered.

“Gwah...!” groaned Atsushi as he unleashed his power to its full potential. “Don’t...tell me...they’re expanding...?!”

The group of fabric blades gathered around Akutagawa’s fist swelled even more and transformed.

“Rashomon...”

Akutagawa’s fist glittered white, and his phase-transitioned skill began interfering with the physical constant of the surrounding space as a colossal

shock wave concentrated toward a single point.

“...Silver Torrent!!”



The silver wave of fabric that followed Akutagawa's fist devoured Atsushi's hand and swept it away.

"Uwaaaaaahhhhhh?!"

Even the choker around Atsushi's neck was swallowed by the torrent and shattered. The entire rooftop was engulfed by a silver light as the vibrations spread throughout the building, shaking the furniture inside like an earthquake. The cannon-like sonic boom, with its accompanying ray of light, was so tremendous that it could be felt anywhere in the city of Yokohama.

There was not a single thing moving on the ravaged rooftop by the time the impact had calmed and the scattered debris settled.

Atsushi was lying on the ground. A blade of fabric had destroyed his entire body, starting with his right arm. He no longer even had the strength to stand. His ability to regenerate had dramatically suffered through the loss of his choker that controlled the tiger. It was taking everything he had just to maintain a pulse.

Akutagawa stood completely still. He had lost far too much blood, and staying on his feet was no small task after repeatedly using his skill until he frayed his nerves. Nevertheless, he did not lose consciousness.

Akutagawa somehow managed to drag his wound-riddled body over to Atsushi.

"Kill...me...," Atsushi repeated while wheezing. "There's no way...I can keep my promise...with the director now. At the very least...I can atone for it...with my life."

His expression twisted with an emotion other than pain. He didn't have the strength left to resist. Taking his life would be a simple task. Akutagawa stood right next to Atsushi and glared down at him icily.

"Very well."

Akutagawa placed his foot on Atsushi's throat, then slowly began leaning into it.

"Gw—Ah...!"

Atsushi's face twisted in agony as the pressure squeezed his blood vessels and respiratory tract, but he didn't even have the strength to lift up his hand and resist. If Akutagawa continued to shift his weight onto Atsushi's neck, he could easily kill him by cutting off his oxygen supply and interrupting the blood flow.

"...ector..." A small tear gently rolled down the corner of Atsushi's eye. "Director... I'm sorry...I didn't become...a student...you could be...proud of..."

"..."

Akutagawa looked down at him in silence, his gaze faintly wavering.

"Forget it."

He took his foot off his opponent's neck. Atsushi immediately started coughing and stared at Akutagawa with evident bewilderment.

"Why...?"

"My job at the detective agency does not include helping those with a death wish," Akutagawa explained before he began staggering over to the exit. Atsushi followed him with his eyes.

"Running away from your past and being frightened of yourself is a battle of its own... Cough up your blood, Tiger. Spit it out and move forward. One day... should you fall to the ground after your fear and your running conquer you, I shall step over your body and mock you."

All of a sudden, there was hollow applause.

"Congratulations."

The uneven clapping whistled in the wind over the rooftop. Akutagawa and Atsushi searched for the voice...and promptly found the source.

"Congratulations! Congratulations, you two. That was brilliant. That was just as good as your match on the ship, if not better."

Standing nearby was a tall shadowy figure whose black overcoat fluttered in the wind. There was something alien about this person, as if only the space around him had been cut out from its surroundings. It was the ruler of the criminal underworld.

“Dazai.”

“The man in black...!”

The Port Mafia’s boss, Osamu Dazai, quietly made his way over to them.

“It appears the boy fueled by anger and revenge for the past four and a half years won.” Dazai walked over with a faint, indecipherable smile. “I’ve been training Atsushi for four and a half years, yet you beat him. It’s hard to believe. Perhaps this is the power of the Armed Detective Agency. *Sigh...* This sure puts me in tough spot.”

Dazai continued approaching until he was standing right by Atsushi’s side. Then he said with no emotion whatsoever:

“Atsushi. You’re fired.”

Atsushi’s eyes briefly opened wide in astonishment, but he almost immediately closed them. “...Okay.”

“From now on, I want you to live in the outside world. I’ve arranged for some acquaintances to take care of you. Now, go—to a world of light. Together with Kyouka.”

“Huh...?!” Atsushi lifted his head in disbelief.

“What are you plotting, man in black?” Although staggering, Akutagawa got into stance for battle. “You lured me here today, didn’t you? ...Using that letter and Gin as bait. But if you wanted to simply kill me, there were plenty of easier ways to do so. What are you after? What do those eyes see beyond this battle?”

“Beyond *this* battle? You’ve got it all wrong, Akutagawa,” began Dazai as he kept walking. “It isn’t just about today. This all started *four and a half years ago*. Ever since I took your sister away from you, every factor was carefully planned for this moment. Training Atsushi, the Mafia’s expansion—everything.”

“What...?”

Akutagawa was taken aback.

“Are you familiar with the Book?” Dazai suddenly asked while he looked at them. “I’m not talking about books in general. I’m talking about a book that’s

one of a kind. It's a book of blank, white paper where whatever you write becomes a reality."

"Whatever you write...becomes a reality...?"

Dazai replied brightly, as if reciting poetry. "Yes. But 'whatever you write becomes real' isn't exactly how it sounds. The Book is more or less the origin of this world. In this Book you'll find an infinite number of potential worlds that can branch out into an infinite number of different paths depending on the choices made and conditions set. And the moment something is written on a page in the Book, a world tailored to what was written is 'summoned.' The potential world inside the Book and the real world change places."

Both Akutagawa and Atsushi were stunned and at a loss for words. The scale of this event was far too large for anyone to comprehend. There was only one thing they both understood: Dazai would neither lie nor joke around under these circumstances.

"Simply put, the term *world* refers to both the single physical reality that exists outside the Book and the infinite possible worlds that are tucked away inside the Book," Dazai explained nonchalantly as if it were common sense. "This world is a possible world. In other words, it's merely one of infinite worlds inside the Book."

Akutagawa and Atsushi were paralyzed with shock, but Dazai's eyes were rigidly serious and shining with intellect. He wasn't lying. This wasn't something they logically understood but knew in the deepest chamber of their minds.

"But reality is still reality. This world holds just as much weight as the outside world. The fact that the Book—which is something like the world's origin—exists in this world as well proves as much. But this world's Book is a drain, so to speak. Orders from the outside world can rewrite this world or even destroy it... And very soon, several powerful foreign organizations will begin invading Yokohama to steal the Book."

"How do you know that?" Akutagawa instinctively asked.

"Because I'm a skill user who can nullify all skills, and I used that trait to create a point of singularity, which forced the worlds' fragments to connect. After that, I successfully managed to read the memories of the me who exists

outside the Book—that is to say, the original me.”

“...?!”

Read memories? Of the other—the original Dazai?

It was such a bizarre concept that they couldn’t keep up.

“The Guild, the Rats, and numerous other powerful organizations are going to come in droves to get their hands on the Book. You two must defeat every one of them and protect this Book at all costs because if they write something, this world will be overwritten and cease to exist.”

“I don’t understand,” Akutagawa claimed with a note of confusion in his voice. “Suppose what you’re saying is even true...what does that have to do with stealing my sister away from me? It doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Because I needed both of your help,” declared Dazai. “I needed the singularity created when both of your skills merge, and I needed that certain something that goes beyond power—something that only comes to life when your souls meet. But in order to do that, I needed to have you fight. I needed you two to face death to get you to understand each other.”

Dazai walked over to the edge of the roof. There was no fence or wall to prevent him from falling. All that was before him was the sky. There would be nothing standing between him and the surface if he were to fall.

“Dazai,” pleaded Atsushi, his voice trembling. “That’s dangerous. Please come back.”

“I need to warn you of something, though. You can’t tell anyone what I just told you. You two are the only ones who can know. If more than three people know the truth, this world will destabilize, and it becomes all the more likely to disappear without even using the Book. That’s why...I’m leaving the rest to you two.”

Dazai took a step back, hanging his heel over the edge and in the sky.

“‘More than three people’...?” Atsushi’s eyes opened wide after counting the number in his head. “Dazai, wait. Don’t tell me you—”

“The time has finally come.” Dazai slowly smiled as he basked in the breeze

blowing at his back. “We’ve finally reached phase five, the final phase. It’s a strange feeling, really. It feels like the night before you go back to your hometown.”

“Man in black.” Akutagawa squinted and asked, “Answer just one thing for me. Why would you go this far? Why are you so fixated on saving this world from disappearing?”

“True... I honestly don’t have a lot of interest in this world. I don’t care what happens to it. At least, I’m sure the me from other possible worlds would say that. However...”

Dazai closed his eyes and grinned almost nostalgically.

“This is the only world where he’s alive and writing novels. I can’t let that world disappear.”

The wind grew stronger, beckoning him, and Dazai slowly leaned back.

“Yes... Yes... Yes...” His eyes were closed and his smile dreamy as he spoke. “The time has finally come. This long-awaited moment. I can’t wait. I truly cannot wait... But I do have one regret: I’ll never be able to read that novel you complete one day. That’s the one last thing I wish I could do.”

Dazai’s body fell past the ledge. Gravity pulled his body from the rooftop toward the ground, far, far away...taking its time.

The sound of the impact couldn’t be heard from the rooftop.

Akutagawa tottered over to the edge and peered down at the surface.

“...”

A strong gust of wind blew by.

The red sunset’s glow.

The red cobblestone.

The man who ruled over the darkness of Yokohama and commanded the Port Mafia.

The man who developed a large-scale plan to control and manipulate the fate of all people and all nature.

That setting sun.

He went where he wanted to go.

To a place far, far away. The point farthest from any place man could ever go.

He had arrived on the other side after stepping across the realm of the living.

Somewhere beyond anyone's grasp.

Whether that truly had value was something Akutagawa would never know. The only one that knew the whole truth was the crystal clear wind that traversed the Yokohama skies and watched over the city.



#4

Time passes by.

Time passes by.

Time simply passes by.

Kenji Miyazawa from the agency said night will fall and morning will break.

Spring will come. Autumn will come. Everything is done in halves: blessings and misfortune, truth and lies, good and evil. He said the sum of these parts was the true essence of nature.

He was right. There was nothing in this world that didn't follow that rule.

Not even in a potential world that existed within a book.

"Ha-ha-ha! I'm impressed, Akutagawa! This hammock you made with your skill is amazing!" Back at the detective agency's office, Ranpo was laughing with glee.

"Ranpo... That still doesn't mean you should be taking a nap in the middle of the office..."

"I don't mind," said Akutagawa. "I learned the secret to using my skill for leisure after taking care of those orphans. I can put Ranpo to sleep within two minutes with just the right amount of rocking. Observe."

"Akutagawa... You've been learning a lot of noncombat-related tricks ever since you came to the agency."

"Of course. Behold. Ranpo has already fallen asleep. From now on, allow me to handle any job that involves soothing children."

"Sure, but...Ranpo isn't a child..."

The stray dog was no more.

Akutagawa had begun helping Kenji work the fields between missions. Every time they ran into each other, they would talk for hours using technical terms that no outsider understood:

“The golden ratio for the pesticides should be...”

“Neonicotinoid pesticides affect biota by...”

“Precisely. Therefore, a pyrethroid should...”

“But that would probably...”

This was how Akutagawa lived his life now.

Kunikida had given up asking him to do paperwork and appointed him “Former Disciplinarian and Current Ambassador of Paper Shredding.” Whenever a document needed to be shredded, he gave it to Akutagawa, who would shout with a bit more cheer than usual, “I will tear you to pieces!” before reducing the paper into fine scraps.

This was how Akutagawa lived his life now.

Time passes by.

People can only keep on living as long as they’re not dead.

The Port Mafia’s White Reaper woke up in a bed in an infirmary.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

He looked around blearily and had no idea what was going on. He didn’t know where he was, how long he had been there, and why he was asleep. All he knew was that he was being fed through an IV drip with a needle in his arm and that there was an unfamiliar woman standing next to him.

“Honestly... You have to really go all out if you plan on killing yourself,” insisted the woman. She was beautiful and had on a white lab coat. She seemed to be around twenty years old with gorgeous blond hair and blue eyes, perhaps of European descent.

“What’s...going on...?” asked Atsushi.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on. The director found you passed out and on the

verge of starvation because you refused to eat,” this blond nurse chided with a stern look in her eyes. “Y’know, you need guts if you plan on starving to death. It’s not something you can half-ass, so don’t even try.”

“Starve to death...?”

Eating was the last thing on Atsushi’s mind. He didn’t know what to do after Dazai’s death, so he had left Yokohama and began aimlessly wandering the countryside. Even he didn’t know why. He just couldn’t *not* do it.

“You don’t want to die. You just don’t want to live. And those are two completely different things. I mean—”

“That’s enough, Elise,” quietly demanded a man hidden behind a curtain on the other side of the room.

“But Rintarou...!” The beautiful woman pouted.

“He’s already painfully aware of that,” the man said as if to scold her. He was seated in a chair and seemed to be tall, but all Atsushi could see was his silhouette behind the curtain. “Do you know where you are, young man?”

Atsushi surveyed the room. That was when he suddenly realized that this was not a hospital. He knew the ceiling and weathered walls all too well. He was in the orphanage’s infirmary.

His heart skipped a beat. What was going on?

“I’m the new director here,” the man claimed as if he could read Atsushi’s mind. “It was Dazai’s last wish. He asked me to manage this orphanage after I had faked my death and began living in seclusion. He also asked me to take you in and watch over you as a resident here once more. I couldn’t refuse... After all, I owed him for saving my life four years ago.”

Dazai’s last wish? New director? Does that mean...this orphanage is still in operation?

Atsushi took another look around, only to realize that it was far different from the infirmary he knew. The bars on the window and chains on the wall to restrain the patients were all gone. Instead, there were medical appliances and bookshelves. On the walls were poorly drawn landscapes, obviously done by a

child. Sunshine peeked in through the skylight, creating a rectangle of warmth on the floor. Atsushi suddenly heard what sounded to be laughing children playing outside. He couldn't possibly imagine hearing those kinds of sounds...if this were the old orphanage, that is.

"You will return to this orphanage as a student. Well, until you become independent, at the very least. Dazai must have been worried about what would happen to you after his death. However, there was one miscalculation in his plan," the man clearly stated. "Our pedagogical views are completely different. That's why I intend on doing things my way."

The blond woman then took a watch out of her pocket and placed it in Atsushi's lap.

"This is..."

There was no mistaking it. This was the last thing the director ever gave him. It was the watch he was given on his birthday.

"Break that watch," demanded the man in a chilling voice. Atsushi's eyes darted back and forth between him and the watch as his racing heart violently hammered against his chest.

"I can't," Atsushi objected, his face pale. There was no way he could. After all, this watch was that man's last—

"Do it. I will not allow you to leave this orphanage until you break that watch," the man who claimed to be the new director demanded icily. "There was no need for you to ever become a student he could be proud of. It was the former director who was wrong. Only after destroying that watch can you believe in yourself and move forward."

"No," Atsushi reflexively replied. "I don't want to move forward. All I want to do is go back in time...to that day in the director's office. I want to redo that moment when the director..."

He was unable to say anything after that. The man sighed, then stood up and pulled back the curtain, revealing himself. Atsushi was taken aback. After all, not a single soul in the Mafia wouldn't recognize this person.

"You're..."

It was the Mafia's former boss, Ougai Mori, a distinguished individual who supposedly died four years ago—and the man who raised Dazai.

"I want you to pay close attention to what I'm about to say," Mori began quietly. "Using violence to make others yield, ruling by fear—I know better than anyone just how efficient and versatile these approaches are. Therefore, I can say this with absolute certainty: Such methods must *never* be used to educate. These are the most barbarous of acts an adult can do to a child. I'm sure you know this better than anyone, since you experienced violence like this firsthand. However, the watch's curse has blinded you."

His eyes were the epitome of seriousness. They were the eyes of a rational adult who was worried for Atsushi.

"..."

Various emotions whirled inside Atsushi's mind like a storm. What was right and what was wrong? Who could he trust and who should he doubt? He didn't have to consider these things when he was in the Mafia. All he needed to do there was to follow orders.

"Please tell me just one thing," quavered Atsushi. "Why are you doing this? What's pushing you this far to change me?"

"It's obvious," Mori replied with a hint of ambiguity in his voice. "A young man with a death wish once came to me. I wanted to save him, but I couldn't... and *never again* do I want to experience that."

There was a switch—a feeling that not even Atsushi could explain—that flipped in his head.

"I'm not going to break it," Atsushi insisted while gently wrapping his hands around the watch. "This watch is proof that I'm me. He told me that. But..."

"Cough up your blood, Tiger. Spit it out and move forward."

He thought back to what Akutagawa said to him on the rooftop.

Akutagawa didn't kill me, then.

And now, Atsushi thought he knew why. Akutagawa was offering him a challenge. And in that case, Atsushi couldn't afford to lose.

“I’m...going to live. And one day...”

Atsushi tried to continue, but he choked on his words. He then gently placed his free hand over the hand holding the watch.

“That should do for now.” There was a quiet, thoughtful tone to Mori’s voice. “You can leave the orphanage once you find something else to prove that you are you. Until then, you can live here as my student—no, as my son.”

Atsushi lowered his gaze. An emotion he had never felt before had his heart in a vise.

He didn’t seem able to give a name to that emotion.



A dry wind blew through Yokohama. Akutagawa’s overcoat gently fluttered in the morning breeze.

“There you are, Akutagawa. Aren’t you cold?” asked Oda after climbing up onto the agency’s dormitory rooftop. “A new job came our way this morning. Our client wants us to rein in a group of armed bank robbers.”

Standing at the edge of the rooftop, Akutagawa replied without turning around. “How many are we up against?”

“A hundred and eighty men.”

“ ‘A hundred and eighty’?” Akutagawa naturally turned around then. “That’s not an armed robbery. That’s an armed occupation. What are they planning on doing? Creating a sovereign state around the bank?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” replied Oda with his usual unbothered expression. “It’s a government financial institution with a mint. The perps are after the banknotes’ original plates and printer, and we were personally requested to stop them.”

“I see.”

There wasn’t a single soul in the neighborhood who didn’t know these two by now. Master and pupil—the agency’s elite detectives Oda and Akutagawa boasted extraordinary power, accuracy, and speed. They were the perfect

combat unit, in part thanks to Oda keeping Akutagawa in check whenever he let himself get out of control and put himself in danger. Both the city and military police had a lot of faith in their abilities.

They would most likely be able to finish this case before lunch.

“Let’s go.”

As Oda began climbing off the roof, he noticed that Akutagawa was still gazing at the city.

“What’s wrong?”

Akutagawa’s eyes were focused on the never-ending wave of buildings that continued into the horizon. A city built by people—people who would live their truths, multiply, and eventually die.

Akutagawa looked over the cityscape, narrowed his eyes, and said:

“Even if this world is but a fleeting shadow...”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Akutagawa shook his head and averted his gaze from the cityscape. “It’s nothing.”

Even if this world is but a fleeting shadow, the lives here are real.

Gin, the detective agency, me, the peculiar feelings of heartache and bewilderment I feel whenever I think about this world—everything here exists for certain. They are not shadows.

Gin was spared from execution. There was never even any plan to execute her in the first place. However, she disappeared right after the dust settled because she cannot return to my side. I have to find her.

But I’m in no rush. After all, she would simply reject me once more if I went desperately searching for her in a frenzy again. Gin believes she cannot be by my side, but I will prove her wrong next time—I’m sure of it.

That is why I am a detective. I solve cases, produce results, and save the weak. I will prove that I am not evil. I don’t know if I can do it. In all honesty, I’m not confident I can prove anything. But nobody knows what the future holds.

The future—in the not-so-distant future, this world may cease to exist. But not just yet.

We both harbor a beast. We have regrets. We try desperately to run from the inescapable. But nonetheless, we will fight and resist our inevitable extinction in order to understand who we really are.

Perhaps we will discover a sinister beast that takes pleasure in slaughtering its enemies and soaking its jaws in their blood. Or perhaps we will find a guardian within, standing quietly and protecting the world.

Who knows which one we will find, but it's worth giving it a try. If, like the detectives said, I am able to find the version of me that is good, maybe that will be the day my sister finally returns to me. Or maybe that will be the day I attain peace...

Until he takes his sister back—takes his life back—and becomes human, this howling dog whose emotions lie beyond his control will keep on running.

AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Asagiri here.

This is the first novel I've done in a while. It's based on the bonus story *Beast: Akutagawa the White, Atsushi the Black*, which was given to everyone who saw the *Dead Apple* film during the first week of its theatrical release in 2018.

If I remember correctly, I believe I was asked to write something about Atsushi and Akutagawa. (Incidentally, there were two bonus short stories included with the film. Those who saw it during the second week of its theatrical release received a story about Dazai and Chuuya.)

It only took me about ten seconds to come up with the main theme because for the longest time, I'd been wondering: *What if Atsushi and Akutagawa switched places?*

What would change if Akutagawa was in the detective agency and Atsushi was in the Port Mafia? What wouldn't change? It felt kind of like a thought experiment. I created the world and laid out the plot in my head like a kid who plays around in science class by gradually switching out the lab equipment.

Now that I think about it, when I was first asked to write the story, they also told me to make it around fifty pages long. Of course, a real pro follows their client's wishes to a T, and I'm proud to be a professional writer, so I met the deadline...and ended up writing one hundred and ninety pages.

.....

Nobody directly complained to me, but I'm sure the production company wasn't too thrilled (all that paper costs money). I went to one of the first showings of *Dead Apple* and received a copy of the bonus story I wrote, but when I looked at it, I immediately noticed it said "bonus booklet," and I thought, *This is basically an entire novel, isn't it?*

As it so happens, the bonus story about Dazai and Chuuya was around one hundred and sixty pages. Someone really ought to hammer some sense into the author's head.

After some further revisions, Beans Bunko released this definitive edition with several tweaks to various scenes and dialogue. The movie booklets are included with the *Dead Apple* Blu-ray/DVD release, so if you're curious, you could pick that up and see the differences for yourself. (This might be a very niche form of entertainment, though...)

Anyway.

Usually, I don't really like telling people what to think when they're reading anything I wrote because I believe the stories themselves should be able to do all the talking, and I feel it's a little cheap to start adding footnotes outside the work itself.

But I'm going to have to break that rule this time because I do want you to think about something in particular after reading this novel. Specifically, how much fun it is to change one aspect of the story and observe how that moves the story along.

Experimenting—like that kid in science class. For instance: What if Atsushi was a woman? What if the Armed Detective Agency was on the verge of bankruptcy when he joined? What if it wasn't a detective agency, but a newspaper publishing company? What if Atsushi had met Montgomery before he ever met Kyouka? What if Chuuya joined the detective agency along with Dazai?

The possibilities are endless, and each possibility carries the same weight. As long as you believe that, then the world that possibility creates will always be right in front of you. All that's left is to let time pass in that world, following whatever your heart wants. Only once you do that will you come to "this side"—a world full of joy and sorrow but also relentless charm. I welcome you to our world.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my editors, the illustrator Harukawa, the film staff who made *Dead Apple* possible, and everyone who picked up a copy of this book. Thank you all. Until we meet again.

Special Thanks

Original Story and Script Supervision by Kafka Asagiri Manga Illustration by Sango Harukawa Director: Takuya Igarashi Script: Yoji Enokido

Character Design and Chief Animation Director: Nobuhiro Arai This novel is the complete version of the bonus story “Beast: Akutagawa the White, Atsushi the Black” given to audiences during the first week of the animated movie *Bungo Stray Dogs: Dead Apple*’s theatrical release in 2018.



AKUTAGAWA

According to Asagiri, Akutagawa stole this overcoat from one of his enemies at the beginning of his journey and always wears it so that he never forgets his desire for revenge. Everything he's wearing underneath the coat was given to him, so he's kind of similar to Atsushi in the main story.

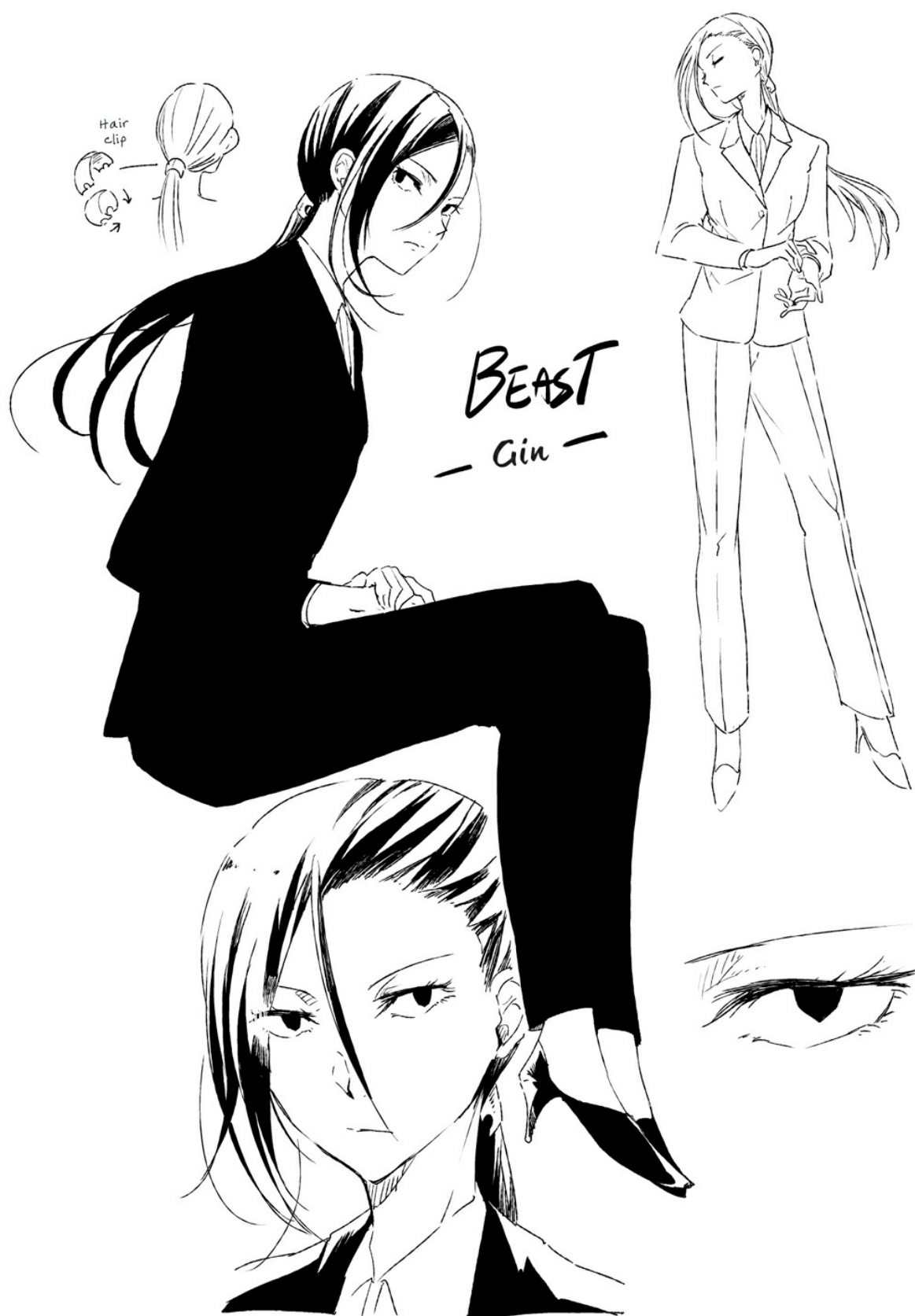


ATSUSHI

I changed his hairstyle because I figured he wouldn't have his usual uneven haircut, since he left the orphanage years ago. As a result, I think he turned out looking a bit like Akutagawa does in the main story. I gave him an overcoat that goes up to his chin because I felt he'd want to hide the choker around his neck.



KYOUKA My instructions were to show that she's accepted her line of work as an assassin, so I focused on how this affects her mentally instead of giving her a more "assassin"-esque look. Kyouka's outfit is reminiscent of Demon Snow, who she considers a symbol of murder. I also tried to make her hair appear more demonic.



GIN Since she's not trying to hide her gender, I gave her more makeup and slightly longer eyelashes. The plan for which illustrations we were going to use changed, so this is the only time I get to show her off.



DAZAI I was asked to give him clothes similar to Mori's, so I put him in a black long-sleeved overcoat. This was the first sketch I did, so at this point, he was still wearing a bandage over the same eye he has covered in the main story.



CHUUYA The novel only mentions that he wears a suit, so he doesn't have an overcoat. In this version, his collared shirt is red. During the early stages, I planned to have everyone but the main five wear the same clothes they have in the main series, but I ended up changing my mind and made everyone except Odasaku look slightly different.

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